Formulalessness

(ebook edition, v. 1.0)

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Introduction

Formulalessness is a blog I started writing in 2019, when I was 31. I was going through a difficult time -- a transition from one phase to the next, marked by a mental breakdown. My writing from around that time may not seem like it's being written by someone undergoing a mental breakdown -- I found writing to be a place of rest, in the middle of the intermittent, intense negative thoughts and feelings. In 2022, I was recovering, and in the fall, I finished most of the work that the blog covers. After that, I worked at a slower pace, tying up loose ends. My blog was also a way to fight back.

I'm not sure why I chose the title *Formulalessness* to begin with, but one meaning could be, how humans are not formulas and yet they find a formula over time, to some extent. That, I feel was the blog's most direct accomplishment.

Today, when I start writing this, is 30 October 2025, about a year since my last post at formulalessness.blogspot.com. Someone emailed me, I think in 2024, about wanting to make an ebook version of *Formulalessness*. He got partway through the project, and then I lost touch with him. I had already somewhat thought of doing that project, myself. Because of his email, I had some reason to think that there could be demand for it. Now, I feel like enough time has passed since my last post, so I have made the ebook myself (or I will have, since I have just begun the project).

What are some reasons why a person might want to read a blog straight through like it's a book? Blogs, to me, seem very historical, in a personal way. I have tried reading the early posts of *Slate Star Codex*. (I know *SSC* is a big part of why I thought of writing a blog and not in the form of books as I had done up until 2019.) Its early posts are kind of haunting: a memory talking about memories, or a ghost talking about ghosts. Somehow *SSC*'s author Scott Alexander (a younger one) is always speaking, long ago. In fact, by now all its posts might seem haunting to me (it was finished about five years ago, in a kind of personal-historical moment for Scott and his followers), but I think the earliest ones, somewhat more personal and older, more haunting than the newer ones.

Reading a blog straight through could show the changes a person goes through. I can certainly see that with *Formulalessness*, which I read (what I had written so far of it) in 2023. At least two distinct mindsets, possibly a third one in the last years of it, evident in writing style and sometimes in content.

Another reason to read straight through is to make sure you get all of it. *Formulalessness* is not 100% a systematic work, but it's largely that, the

development of my own thought system.

By the time you read this, I will have made three versions of this -- PDF, epub, and HTML. I will call this "version 1.x" of this project. "Version 2.x" could add better support for internal links in ereaders (discussed below), and/or a print version. I don't know what kind of demand there will be for this, so I will only make the lower-effort version first. If you want, you could print up your own copy of the PDF or HTML version. Another use for them could be offline reading. The epub is particularly useful for people with ereaders, which some people prefer to reading on the computer or phone.

I've tried to retain some of the functionality of the blog in the PDF and epub. Every post has a "tag name", which is based on blogspot's way of turning post titles into filenames for posts. This tag is not quite a hashtag (uses "%" instead). For instance, the first post, "No one ever tells you these things", has a "tag name" of **no-one-ever-tells-you-these-things**. If you search that, you will find every time a post links to it, as well as the post. If you search **%no-one-ever-tells-you-these-things**, you will only find the post itself (and this page).

I have kept the blog's post labels (for instance, "No one ever tells you these things" has the labels "maturity, personal, relationships, social connection"). I have added "#"'s to the beginning of them when used in the list of labels, making them into hashtags. You can search a hashtag, such as **#maturity**, and you will find all the posts labeled "maturity".

One feature of the blog that I did not carry over into this ebook project was the comments. There weren't a lot of comments, as you can see at formulalessness.blogspot.com. One reason to leave them out being that the original commenters were willing to comment on a blog, but maybe not have those comments copied into books derived from that blog.

Formulalessness has some external links, and also a lot of internal links. If you click on a link in the PDF or HTML version, you should be able to get the "tag name" out of the link itself. I will leave the internal links as-is (to save me work), in which case they can take you to formulalessness.blogspot.com, which I intend to leave up for the foreseeable future.

An old Nook I tested didn't seem to be able to open or read links, but could search the #tags and %tags. If you use an ebook reader, maybe the internal links won't work. All the context provided by the internal links for a post that you read comes from posts that either came earlier than the one you're on or possibly were in posts released on the same day. So hopefully you can keep up with what I'm saying anyway. You could turn to the PDF or HTML version or formulalessness.blogspot.com when necessary.

In version 2.x, I may try to turn internal links into footnotes to the %tag and, in the print version, page number. This might make the epub more functional. In the print version, I would make an index for all the labels, and if ambitious, for other terms.

If you find any problems with this ebook edition, let me know. I may use your feedback to help improve it. My email address can be found at https://10v24.net/#email

--21 November 2025

Notes

Now that I have finished the process, I have some additional notes:

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I tried to keep the order of posts the same as on blogspot when there were multiple posts in one day. But on one occasion, 6 April 2021, for some reason I didn't post them in a logical order (or one that seemed logical to me now), so I changed it to make it flow better for the ebook.

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The video poems embedded in *Formulalessness* can be found through formulalessness.blogspot.com. Another place to look is in my Internet Archive page (https://archive.org/details/@james_banks) as "Video Poems (2020 - 2021)".

I found at least one broken link (Didi Haryadi's Indonesian music page). Over time, there may be more. I thought about looking up every link to give it context, so that something like it could be found. I wasn't sure if that was a good use of time. But I thought that YouTube links were particularly opaque, so I looked up all of them and list them below. Note that there is some chance that some of these videos or channels will change names over time.

The videos embedded in popular-songs-indonesian-book-review are, in order, with the channel they come from in {}:

Es Lilin - Nining Meida {Sundari Soekotjo}

NINING MEIDA - KALANGKANG {sangkurian99}

Anjeun {Nining Meida - Topic}

Efek Rumah Kaca - Cinta Melulu (lirik) {Sandi Hermana}

Videos linked to in popular-songs-indonesian-book-review are:

> "V'Lirushalayim" Hazzan Elliot Joel Portner {Bportbeats}
>
> 2012 San Diego "Big Bay Boom" Fireworks Bust / Fail in 720P HD {myTwinBees}

Video linked to in establishedness-and-loving-god:

> ISA ALBUM - RAYLA NOEL (2004, Re-mastered 2020) {Vihan Damaris}

Video linked to in indonesian-songs-translated:

> Es Lilin - Lagu Daerah Jawa Barat (Lirik dan Terjemahan) {Lagu Daerah Indonesia}

Video linked to in long-links-3:

> the art of religious interpretation (midnight mass vs god's not dead) {biz barclay.}
>
> understanding snapewives: religion, fandom, sociology & erotica {biz barlay.}
>
> the art of religious interpretation (midnight mass vs god's not dead) {biz barclay.}

Video linked to listening-to-hold-music-same-loop-30 is:

> ANOTHER EARTH: The Russian Cosmonaut {SearchlightPictures}

The video embedded in %different-ways-of-valuing is:

> "ISA ALBUM - RAYLA NOEL (2004, Re-mastered 2020)" {Vihan Damaris}

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I assume some or all ereaders have trouble with images. I made alt text for all of them. Fortunately there weren't that many images.

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Other than adding the tag names, I tried not to edit the text of the blog. Where I did so visibly, I used "{{" / "}}" or "{" / "}" to indicate text I added.

There was one set of problems where in the original blog, I didn't close blockquotes correctly, which didn't affect that format too badly, but which became a big problem when all the files were added together to make the whole book HTML. So I fixed that, as best as I could. It seemed clear to me where to make changes, in keeping with the intent of the original posts.

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Formulalessness progressively develops ideas and terminology. The most current terminology for my writing project can be found in the successor blog to *Formulalessness* (*Following*, currently found at blog.10v24.net) and the *MSL* and *Voluntary Millennial Holiness* booklets.

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Blogspot lets you write "posts" and "pages" (posts being the majority of the blog, that are released over time, while pages (like "Top Posts" and "Bible Source") give information about the blog). The "pages" for *Formulalessness* are added to the end of the ebook, after the "posts".

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The font used in the PDF is Liberation Serif.

POSTS

"No one ever tells you these things"

%no-one-ever-tells-you-these-things

Wednesday, February 27, 2019

I'm thinking about maturity. People grow up a certain way. Sometimes people say "No one ever tells you these things." Why doesn't someone come up with a book of such things, so that we can tell young people about them in advance? That would be nice.

One way maturity works is that you struggle with a question, then lose interest in the struggle leaving a resulting opinion and years later you encounter a young person and express yourself dogmatically.

Have you ever been a young person and felt like everybody knew something about you but they wouldn't tell you what it was? You're supposed to figure something out, but it's too hard for you. So then people keep waiting and waiting for you to figure it out, hoping that it will magically happen. Is this in your best interests? Is it in theirs? It doesn't seem to matter if it is or isn't. It's probably an instinct that no one thinks to override.

Older people get annoyed at younger people caring, even if the younger person cares about something important. One time I was the older person to a younger Twitter person who cares about human trafficking. Sorry (if you're reading this you might remember and know who you are). Older people's brains just don't work as well and can't handle enthusiasm. Slow and steady works better. We've been through a lot epistemically and are just trying to retain what little shreds of intellectual self-trust we can muster. That's something that could go in the book for younger people to read.

Here's something else for that book: when I was in high school, I had a crush on a girl. She would never tell me to my face that she wasn't interested. But, it's true, the signs weren't there. But I thought, "well, maybe those are signs. I don't actually know that they're not. There's still a chance." And I was fairly okay with that. It wasn't like I was rushing to get married or anything. Finally, I got tired of having the crush and wrote her a note that asked point blank how she felt. And she replied, straightforwardly. I was a very nice person but she wasn't interested. So yeah. Why isn't that kind of thing more clear?

Well, girls are sketched out by boys and need the boys to have an intuitive

understanding of them for a relationship to work in the first place. And boys aren't always clear in how they express themselves either, because they don't want to reveal what they really want. So there's a norm of playing games, mind games. And a lot of people do okay at mind games. But some people don't.

I think there's a reason why we don't tell people things in advance. It's better for them to learn the hard way. I can see that making some sense. But other cultures do more to guide their young people -- as people -- into adulthood. We worry about math and reading in education but not about life skills. Other cultures have serious initiation rites, but we only have some religious ones that many people don't undergo.

Okay, well that's all for now. Do any of you have any stories to share about things "no one ever tells you"? Maybe there's enough for a book.

Labels: #maturity, #personal, #relationships, #social connection

Giving Uptake

%giving-uptake

Saturday, March 2, 2019

I first encountered the concept of *Giving Uptake* in Nancy Nyquist Potter's *How Can I Be Trusted?*. She said there that giving uptake is necessary for someone to be trustworthy. Uptake is when someone renders valid the thing that you say, renders it fully said. For instance (from Stanford Encyclopdia of Philosophy):

> Other attempts at speech acts might misfire because their addressee fails to respond with an appropriate uptake: I cannot bet you $100 on who will win the election unless you accept that bet. If you do not accept that bet, then I have tried to bet but have not succeeded in betting.

One can see how this applies to areas other than betting. If you say "no" to someone and they interpret it as though you didn't really mean it, you learn that saying "no" is ineffective, and it looks like the other person is right -- you really weren't serious, it's made to seem, about not wanting what they wanted to do. Refusing to give uptake is a means of exerting power on other people. And people can fail to be able to give uptake because they're deadened.

When you don't understand someone else, how can you give them uptake consistently? But then they won't communicate with you as openly. And then you don't trust them as much, a spiral of trusting less and less.

Failing to give uptake is related to gaslighting. Gaslighting denies memory, while failing to give uptake denies speech in the moment.

It's not always necessary to signal uptake, as long as it's a reality, but signaling it can help, if the signaling is backed up by reality. If you allow people to not signal uptake in contexts where it could be ambiguous (like over the Internet), you trust them to act on the basis of giving you uptake. Maybe justified, maybe not, depending.

Labels: #communication, #psychology, #trust

"Jesus Wept"

%jesus-wept

Monday, March 4, 2019

The following is a memorial lesson I gave at the 2019 All-California Sacred Harp Convention. Memorial lessons are given to remember people who have recently died. You can hear an audio version here.

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In the days of the early church, as recorded in 1 Thessalonians, we see that death was referred to as "falling asleep". Paul says (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

> But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

For those like Paul, death was a light thing, a closing of the eyes. They had hope in God, who would, or will, resurrect them to new bodies and new life at the end of this age, as he planned.

According to this plan, in John 11, Jesus saw his beloved friends grieve over their brother Lazarus, and offered them the hope of a new body on the last day. (John 11:17-27)

But a few verses later, in John 11:35, we see that Jesus wept. This is a short verse, easy to memorize, and it's one of the ones that ought to be memorized first, both in itself and with its context. "Jesus wept", in itself, is God with a broken heart. In context, it's God weeping with those who grieve, not because they've permanently lost Lazarus, but because we have a world in which people can't see beyond the grave, though they might want to. Many Christians grieve for people whom they believe have only fallen asleep, feeling in their bodies that they will never see them again, although their spirits know better. Grief itself can be a raging thing, even destroying the lives of the people left behind. All of this is cause for God to weep.

A few verses later, though, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. His sisters can have him back in their lives after all, so soon. Jesus knew he would do this all along. But Jesus wept. He lived in our time, though he didn't have to, and this is a reason why he deserves to be followed with all of our hearts.

So we live in our time of grief, and in eternity, when we think of those who have gone on.

Labels: #Christianity, #grief, #Jesus, #life lessons

The Moth and the Star / The Owl Who Was God

%the-moth-and-star-owl-who-was-god

Tuesday, March 5, 2019

Here is a link to the James Thurber story "The Moth and the Star". It's a story about seeking the unseekable, impractical, almost-non-existent and how that makes you a fool and keeps your body beautiful. The link also includes Thurber's "The Owl Who Was God", which is like a mirror version of "The Moth and the Star".

Apparently, someone set "The Moth and the Star" to music.

I could connect "The Moth and the Star" to gravity and grace. Star-seeking (what the one moth does) is sort of like seeking grace. The bridge lamps (what the other moths seek) are like gravity.

We devour people and crave power in this world, because that's *reality*. But realisticness isn't always trustworthy.

I don't know if Thurber intended this, but one could contrast the moth, who flies to something impersonal and more or less infinitely far away, with the birds in "The Owl Who Was God", who follow the owl, something personal and tangible and present. Moth contrasted with birds, star contrasted with owl.

Labels: #faith, #James Thurber, #parable, #Simone Weil

Gravity and Grace

%gravity-and-grace

Tuesday, March 5, 2019

Simone Weil wrote a set of notes which were published under the title of *Gravity and Grace*. Most of the book is about other things, but there is a section about the titular "gravity" and "grace". Here are some of the thoughts from it, to help explain the meaning of the terms:

> All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.
>
> We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity, unless there is supernatural intervention.
>
> Lear, a tragedy of gravity. Everything we call base is a phenomenon due to gravity. Moreover the word baseness is an indication of this fact.
>
> Queueing for food. The same action is easier if the motive is base than if it is noble. Base motives have in them more energy than noble ones. Problem: In what way can the energy belonging to the base motives be transferred to the noble ones?
>
> Not to judge. All faults are the same. There is only one fault: incapacity to feed upon light, for where capacity to do this has been lost all faults are possible. "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me." There is no good apart from this capacity.
>
> To lower oneself is to rise in the domain of moral gravity. Moral gravity makes us fall toward the heights.

Labels: #definition, #Simone Weil

Trusting Well, part 1

%trusting-well-part-1

Thursday, March 7, 2019

I expect the topic of trusting well to require multiple installments.

People can get in situations like that mentioned in this post where people trust less and because they trust less, they behave in a less trustworthy way, and the other person does the same, a downward spiral of trust.

One would think that this would always end a relationship, but often, it does not, because there's some force holding people together other than the quality of their interactions with each other. Maybe it's a job that you can't quit, or family you won't disown, or friends who need you for a purpose, or whom you are devoted to for some reason other than the quality of your interactions.

Labels: #note, #relationships, #trust

I and Thou

%i-and-thou

Thursday, March 7, 2019

I read *I and Thou* a while ago, and might read it again, but this is what I remember from it:

In ordinary language, we say, "I love you", or "I see you", or "I hear you". But there's another kind of language, which is deeper than that. We might say "I see you", but really mean "I see it". We have a certain way of saying "I" in that deeper language that goes along with saying "It" of some person or thing, and another way of saying "I" when we say "You" in that deeper language.

We see people, and ourselves, as real personal beings, or as machines to be manipulated.

We worship idols in the "I-It" way, but we worship God in the "I-You" way. If we worship God in the I-It way, it's not God that we worship. Relating to God in the I-You way requires that we relate to humans and animals that way. Saying "You" of something comes from wholeness (a whole "I") and is of or to wholeness (a whole "You").

Labels: #definition, #Martin Buber, #philosophy, #relationships

Living for Reality, Living for Image

%living-for-reality-living-for-image

Saturday, March 9, 2019

In our culture, we value reality. If you love someone, you want their real well-being. If you can't see it come to pass, then you are depressed. You have to be, you're emotionally tied to their well-being.

We value being in touch with reality as it is, even if it depresses us or makes life make less sense. "Reality" is defined as "what we know through the knowledge that contributes to human well-being". But it's also defined as "what we know through the rules that give us knowledge, applied consistently, whether we like it or not."

But there's another way to look at things. You could desire instead to be someone who is the best version of yourself you can be. Incidentally, this involves concern for other people's well-being. If you can't save the world, you can rest in the thought that you did your best -- if you did. It's okay for you and other people to suffer and die, as long as you all did your best.

You can live to be the most beautiful image of yourself, and live for beauty, tasks, and stories.

Is ultimate reality what is seen in front of us and felt with our bodies, or what we can see but not grasp, or what speaks to us from beyond this world? Whether ultimate reality is based on images of personality and stories and doing your best, or whether it is based in what brings about tangible, visible human well-being, is something that can be debated, although often not profitably, because each side sees the very debate according to their own lenses. But there is cross-over; as above, it is beautiful to care about other people. Also, it can be beneficial to human well-being if people do their best instead of getting discouraged by all the bad things they couldn't prevent.

Labels: #altruism, #definition, #epistemology, #love, #morality, #ontology

Rootedness and Respect

%rootedness-and-respect

Monday, March 11, 2019

How should we treat young people (or anyone)? Answers: respect, make society "rooted". (Long post.)

Introduction

Rootedness: Here's Simone Weil's definition, from *The Need for Roots* (p.43, Beacon Press, 1952 ed.):

> To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of the community, which preserves in living shape certain treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession, and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.

She goes on to identify military conquest and money as things that bring the opposite of rootedness, uprootedness. People who have been uprooted can pass their uprootedness on to their children through their culture. Weil puts a high value on work and finding meaning in work. She suggests that one thing that would make work more rooted is if workers could see the things they work on being used. She also suggests that schools for peasants teach them science based around the lifecycle of plants and agriculture.

I don't know much about American Indian philosophy. Two *Partially Examined Life* podcast episodes (Part 1 and Part 2 of "Relating to American Indian Philosophy") taught me pretty much all I know about their philosophy. The thing that sticks out to me from that is relationality. American Indian philosophy contains the idea that everything is related to everything else. This sounds a lot like Weil's rootedness, worked into how we think about everything we see.

I had always been impressed by what I saw, from afar, as American Indian respectfulness. Not just respectfulness, but a lack of flippancy.

Rootedness breaks down when people don't take us seriously. When we are malicious, lazy, forceful, or merciless, we don't take people seriously. These are some ways to be disrespectful of other people. When we don't respect people, we betray them, destroying trust. This makes it hard for any kind of group to function. Background trust is destroyed, which makes it so that new relationships can't form.

The more damaged people are, the harder it is for them to endure social environments that aren't to their preferences. We think of preferences as based in ego, but they're also based in survival. People are individualists largely because they can't trust other people.

In a rooted society, there is a place for everyone. When we are given a place, we are given a relationality to other people, and in that, we are given respect.

The idea of boundaries connects.

In the West, we don't come from a rooted background. The West is pretty used to its own uprootedness. So we have to teach ourselves how to give each other a place, how to relate all the people to each other. But what's good about this problem, unlike many other problems, is that just about anyone can help with it. No matter where you fall on any given spectrum, there's probably someone who's sort of similar to you somewhere. Maybe, if nothing else, similar in their loneliness. People have called our society "atomized", but anyone can help make it more "composite".

How Can I Respect?

Which is worse, lack of love, or lack of respect? Which leads to more abuse? Probably lack of respect.

We sometimes view respect as optional, as something that needs to be earned. There are two kinds of respect: ego respect and survival respect. People fight to defend themselves, which is a fight to get respect. Egoistic self-defense asks for ego respect, and usually gets survival respect. Survival self-defense asks for survival respect. People who don't get survival respect get abused. People think it's their duty to oppose egoistic self-defense, but by breaking down other people's ability to defend themselves at all, they can destroy their ability to protect themselves from abuse.

Some signs of lack of respect for others:

You can see another's *inferiority* instead of *them*. Viewing a person in terms of their attributes, rather than as a person.

(When you think you're an "awesome guitar player" or "a really conscientious worker" or the like, you might not be respecting yourself -- by seeing yourself according to positive stereotypes.)

Making allowances for other people's inferiority.

Warning sign: feel a feeling of affection that you can't "unfeel", which is an emotional fact to you.

Warning: you think someone is cute.

Warning: you think someone is annoying.

Warning: seeing people as being in need of your help.

Warning: being magnanimous toward someone.

Warning: seeing someone as insufficient (weak, sick, immature, wrong, etc.)

Warning: being, or seeking to be, on another level than someone. (For instance, understanding them better than they understand themselves.)

Sign: seeing someone as useful.

Warning: seeing someone as helpful.

Warning: you think someone is beautiful.

Warning: you view someone as working through a process, rather than actually saying what they mean.

Warning: you form predictions of what other people will do or become.

Any time an attribute of someone impresses you strongly, it tempts you to see that instead of them.

Warning: when you don't understand someone.

Sign: you devalue respect.

Warning: you think ego is invalid.

Warning: you're a fake person, overall, or in some area of your life.

Warning: you're a lazy person, overall, or in some area of your life.

Warning: you're a cynical person, overall, or in some area of your life.

Warning: you have superior taste, overall, or in some area of your life.

Sign: you think someone else's desire to be better than they are is invalid.

Sign: you enjoy someone, you don't trust them, but you don't fear them.

Sign: you assume a position of dominance over someone else and you're okay with that.

Sign: you disassemble, soothe away, manage, other people's confrontations

of you.

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Lack of respect is a form of lack of trust. People who are not trusted have a harder time trusting themselves, and people who don't trust themselves can't behave as consistently. When people are respected, they behave in a way that's more objectively respect-worthy. Seeing the facts can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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If you like intellectual things, you can think of respect as being something like "apophatic anthropology". Or at least, that sort of indicates the right way. Apophatic theology involves seeing God as being wholly other than what we can say of him. But people who practice apophatic theology (I think) usually still think of God in the way he's described in scriptures or in their personal experience. On some level, he still has attributes, even though they try to deny them (I think) in order to gain respect for him. Apophatic theology is a formula, and so is the usual "God is love, God is powerful, God is ..." theology. The reality of God is beyond this. The answer's so far away -- but so close. God is just a person. Similarly with people.

If you like psychology, one idea that points the way to respect is "mentalizing". Mentalizing is the intuitive grasp of another person as a person, a mind with thoughts and feelings. In contrast, people can figure each other out in a "teleological" way. They put together a deliberate or semi-deliberate mental model of other people, just the same as they might figure out how an engine works. Teleological thinkers can be good at predicting other people, a lot of the time.

The analogy isn't perfect, because people can be capable of mentalizing and still disrespect people.

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It's possible to be more mature than other people, or more skilled. This is a state which should fill you with something like sorrow, rather than triumph -- a quiet sorrow. And not a sorrow that the other person is so unfortunate, but rather that you are unfortunate. What you want is to be able to see the attribute or fact of someone's skills, be able to take that into account, while on the deepest level see them as equals and/or sufficient, or best of all, fail to see or trust the categories of "inferior", "superior", "sufficient", "insufficient", or even "equal" -- just you and them.

If you like intellectual things, you might want to read *I and Thou* by Martin Buber, who talks about these kinds of things in a philosophical way. He says there's such a thing as "I-You" relationships, where your pre-rational

orientation toward others is that they are people. He contrasts that with the "I-It" orientation, where you see people as objects. He says that when you say "I" in "I-You" it's different than saying "I" in "I-It". It would seem from that that you have to heal your relationship to others and yourself simultaneously, that it's impossible to fix one without fixing the other, because they are actually one thing.

You can be hard on someone while respecting them -- probably the basic first step to full respect is to be hard on yourself and others -- valuing and practicing respect in an obvious way. But being hard on people isn't necessarily respectful. You can be merciless, which is a way of not seeing a person as a person.

Someone said that hope is a sense both of desire and likelihood, as though the two are a bit hard to distinguish. So we recognize that when people abuse each other, they do so out of a love of evil and a sense of power at the same time. So we try to break other people's sense of power, so that they don't do evil. Some people are capable of doing good while having a sense that there are no consequences, but not everyone is on that level. People whom you wouldn't think, need consequences -- people who wouldn't think they were the kind of people to need consequences. Enforcement makes us better people, better than we realize. This is relevant to the problem of young people disrespecting otheres.

People who genuinely do respect people are the ones in the position to break the power of other people -- something they do without any pleasure or deadness -- and to "put the fear of God" in other people -- something they do without malice, and, somehow, without being forceful or merciless, without writing people off.

If I give practical steps, people who are inclined to "work a program" will do everything but still miss the point. Sometimes the only thing that seems to teach people in a deeper way has to rewrite who they are on a flesh level. You have to be broken by life in order to start changing your mind. It's awful to really grow on a deeper level -- at least, it is for a lot of people. The Bible talks about "fools", who need correction and hate correction. What might work to avoid foolishness is to get the full value of being broken, rather than turning away from its lessons when you get back to health. That's hard, though, because life tells us to have power and power tells us to disrespect. You can try to get the most out of your pain, though.

One of the best ways to respect someone is to listen to them. One of the best ways to listen is to be silent. When you talk to people, be weaker than their words.

Maybe art can help. I wrote a short story as part of *How Can We Love?*, one of my books, which is about respect and disrespect, called "My Son". It's

about how messed up a person can be by someone who doesn't respect them, and it's vivid. A narrative like that might help -- or it might be just more words.

One practice that could help would be focused contemplation. Spend two hours doing something relaxing and thinking about the different people in your life and whether you respect them. When you interact with people, ask God what lesson you need to learn.

Being careful not to believe false things can help you be more "epistemically empathetic", and this can help you take other people's beliefs seriously. If you hold yourself to know reality as it is, if that's something that has power over you, to which you submit, then you are more the kind of person who will try to find the reality of persons in themselves. We can never know reality in itself, in a way that we can put into words, and so it is with people. Trying in one domain helps in another.

One "bottom line" is: let other people have power over you. A form of trust. Trust people. People who don't listen may do so out of the survival distrust, or out of ego distrust, or out of inertial distrust, the distrust left over from survival distrust that is no longer necessary. But trust as much as you can. In religious terms, not trusting when you can is saying that creation is not good for a reason other than the Fall.

A corollary to that is: when you can't trust someone, stay away from them.

A Reading from *The Need for Roots*

The Need for Roots by Simone Weil, p. 134 - 136:

> It is true that men are capable of dividing their minds into compartments, in each of which an idea lives a sort of life of its own, undisturbed by other ideas. They don't care for either critical or synthetic effort, and won't submit to making either unless obliged.
>
> But in situations of fear, anguish, when the flesh draws back before the prospect of death, or too great a degree of suffering or danger, in the mind of every man, even if he is completely uneducated, a manufacturer of arguments suddenly stands forth, who elaborates proofs to demonstrate why it is legitimate and right to avoid that particular death, suffering, or danger. Such proofs can either be good or bad, depending on the particular case. At all events, at the time, the body's disturbed condition gives them an intensity of persuasive force that no orator has ever succeeded in acquiring.

> There are people to whom things do not happen in this way. This is either because their natures protect them from fear, that their flesh, blood, and bowels remain unaffected by the presence of death or suffering; or else because their minds have attained such a degree of unity that this manufacturer of arguments has no opportunity of getting to work in them. With others, again, he is able to get to work, and makes his arguments felt, but they are scorned nevertheless. That in itself presupposes either an already high degree of inward unity, or else powerful outward incentives.
>
> Hitler's profound remark on the subject of propaganda, namely that brute force is unable to prevail over ideas if it is alone, but that it easily manages to do so by taking unto itself a few ideas of no matter how base a nature, provides also the key to the inner life. The tumults of the flesh, however violent they may be, cannot prevail over a thought in the mind, if they act alone. But their victory is an easy one if they communicate their persuasive force to some other thought, however inferior it may be. That is the important point. No thought is of too inferior a quality for the role of ally of the flesh. But the flesh needs thought of some kind as an ally.

All of this to say: maybe there's something here to help us in developing respect. Respect is an attitude we have toward other people, most importantly a pre-rational one. It could be a passion of ours, some fleshly desire, which requires some kind of rational form for us to fully trust. It's not just pre-rational, but also an explicit belief. It could be that the passion of love for someone causes us to want to form the pre-rational attitude of respect. I think that's true a lot of the time. But warring with love is its appetitive side, the extent to which love is a form of enjoyment, or feeds enjoyment, or enjoyment is taken for love. Enjoyment is a passion that asks for disrespect to be formed. Likewise we have the passion of power, which casts about for a an idea or pre-rational attitude to justify it. So we might want to learn to be afraid, not of enjoyable things, but of our enjoyment of them, to enjoy things in holy fear, to only enjoy things because we have to in order to experience reality. And likewise to feel utterly undeserving of our power, like it ought to be taken away from us at any moment.

People can be very strong in their beliefs, as with those whose "natures protect them from fear, [...] their flesh, blood, and bowels [...] unaffected by the presence of death or suffering", whose "minds have attained such a degree of unity that this manufacturer of arguments has no opportunity of getting to work in them." In Weil's context, this helps people resist evil, but

the faculties and dispositions for resisting evil can also be those of not listening to other people. People can be spiritually and psychologically muscle-bound. This is parallel to those who seem strong and combative who are actually acting out of trauma and thin resources. In both cases there is a tendency to lunge out. A very put-together person -- a secure, mature person -- can fail to pay attention to other people out of their mind's "degree of unity" -- and this is somewhat frightening, because one's own security and maturity are so persuasively trust-producing to oneself, that one won't think to question oneself. What is trustworthy is trust-producing, but not all trust is itself the most trustworthy, and people who get out of the habit of distrusting themselves are in danger of disconnection with reality. I suppose the positive way to put it is, keep trusting the process of better and better trustworthiness, keep trying to trust more, and in the process you will trust yourself less sometimes.

In trustworthy settings, we tend to trust, and when we trust, we can trust anything, including love -- which motivates us to respect. Or a setting could be useful for the purpose of developing respect. In this case it would be trustworthy in a limited way, for that purpose. A respect-producing environment might be one in which respect is modeled by those in positions of power, influence, or authority. Another respect-producing environment could be one that emphasized people's connection to other people, since respect is relational. Self-respect involves seeing the other as one who will respect you, as much as saying "You" involves saying "I" in the "I-You" way. In order to respect other people, see them as "you"s, you have to be different to yourself.

Another respect-producing environment would be one which emphasized reality, because fake respect is disrespect, and is where disrespect can hide in those who in some sense don't want to disrespect. But overall trustworthiness enables people to enter the general state of trust, out of which respect-producing motions can come. Therefore it could be counterproductive to try to make respect a formula for a group, a "core value". Overall trustworthiness, including respect, is needed for any group to function anyway.

Declaring core values, and that you're going to do things, is of some value, but what's more essential for trust, and respect, is your pre-rational attitudes, all the betrayals that don't happen because they're not in your nature to cause. Telling yourself that you want self-respect, that you want to be respected, doesn't do as much good as seeing other people as those who will respect you, and likewise telling yourself that you want to respect other people doesn't do as much good as just doing it. Talking about things can be a placeholder.

So an organization needs people who understand what is needed intuitively, and can embody what is required for a trustworthy environment.

To get back to the Weil quote one more time: in the last paragraph, she mentions that inferior ideas can be used by the flesh's needs. But perhaps good drives can annex to themselves inferior ideas. Perhaps that's an explanation for "faith", that God gives us a drive to believe, or God as he contacts us is the drive to believe, which attaches itself to inferior ideas. I don't think Weil believed that humans are unable to believe ideas because they are superior, otherwise, how could we think that any were superior to begin with? But it may be that ideas, as much as words, are not really the point, and that wordless, idealess realities are more important. But we still seem to need ideas for some sort of purpose. Words are useful in pointing out wordless realities. If I say "sky", you know what I'm talking about, more or less. I'm not talking about "s-k-y", I'm talking about ... I have to use words to describe the sky, but you get the picture: it's this thing that I can see but can't touch, which I can see above me, blue or grey or pink in the daytime and black or dark grey in the nighttime. Similarly with ideas -- they point to non-cognitive realities. Pointing something out can open a pathway to deliberate action, and can help us notice a phenomenon more often.

Belonging and Wider Rootedness

A person can be a word to us, in their image of personality, pointing to an unspoken reality, or a force or desire within us.

You meet someone who gives you a sense of belonging -- a "one-person rootedness environment". Through them, everything around you is home. You relate to other people through them, because they do, because of the home they bring you all around the very places that weren't home before. You are inclined to worship them and "eat" them -- to disrespect them.

Narrow-scale rootedness could be called "belonging". We seek belonging, and when we get it, we stop caring about society-wide rootedness. The desire to understand the big picture -- truth as a whole, society as a whole, the past and the future (the whole skein) -- can come out of a desire for rootedness, a kind of cognitive rootedness. God is connected to the big picture, and we connect through God through our connection to the big picture. The desire to relate to the truth as a whole, society as a whole, to God, can in fact often enough really just be a desire for belonging, and once we get belonging -- from a friend, lover, family, assembly, or whatever -- we lose interest in God, in society, in the truth as a whole. The most powerful and effective temptations are where a connection with a good thing destroys, mutes, quenches another.

There can be belonging based around uprootedness. Gathering and bonding while mocking the same things, forming gangs or armies. Young men are tempted to do this, naturally do this. We like people who are uprooted like us -- let's be uprooted together, as a song might go.

As a shadow -- or anti-shadow -- version of this, there can be a rootedness in a world beyond this world. This is like the moth flying to the star -- it doesn't feel the same to connect to what you can only see far away, as a point of light, which never warms you. This kind of rootedness helps you not be beguiled by belonging and the preservation of the status quo, which follows from belonging.

It's respectful see the danger in a dangerous person, the evil in an evil person, not only the good in them. So it's respectful to see the evil and danger in yourself, and not only the good in you, while also seeing yourself as Beyond Attributes -- as just a person. I think that's the most hopeful way to approach yourself, both if you're a young person or an older person.

The rootedness of childhood leads to the disrespect of the adolescent. The spiritual nourishment of a (relatively) protected childhood gives you "stores of fat" to fuel your disrespect as you enter the years where childhood order and restraint break down. Perhaps "stores of fat" disconnected from a source of nourishment just are the spiritual-fleshly condition behind disrespect.

Labels: #communication, #flippancy, #formulalessness, #formulas, #idealization, #longer, #love, #Martin Buber, #power, #psychology, #relationships, #respect, #rootedness, #Simone Weil, #social connection, #trust

Favor

%favor

Tuesday, March 12, 2019

In some settings, I feel *favor*. Favor is a state in which you can put out a little bit of effort and it's reflected back to you. If you put out a message, you get energy back, in the form of a message, or some kind of action. People give you uptake. You have an intuitive grasp of the situation, and petitions and questions flow out of you in a comfortable way, well-timed and in the right tone of voice. People approve of you, don't read you wrong, trust you -- things are easy, socially.

With favor, I have more of a voice. I can think of more things to say, and I'm rooted, to a certain extent. I can see my place in the world.

Because this is an intuitive thing, it's hard to manufacture. Maybe to find it, you just have to travel from place to place. It helps when you find people with the same background as you, or the same type of brain. People with schizophrenia or related disorders, and bipolar people, are easier for me to connect with. I have bipolar disorder and sometimes identify with the traits of schizophrenia-related personality disorders. It's not like I think "oh, this person is mentally ill too, I'll like them", but something about having been in strange and difficult places mentally makes it so that we're somehow both in tune.

Labels: #definition, #intuition, #personal, #relationships, #rootedness, #social connection, #trust

Fact

%fact

Sunday, March 24, 2019

Fact is that which claims the right to be freestanding truth.

Freestanding truth can do or build anything, according to certain rules, can be taken mechanically and driven to any conclusion, regardless of lived reality or human well-being.

"I am a fact -- I can be far-reaching with any consequence, to the ultimate. I can be taken to any logical conclusions, by myself or in combination with other human facts. I can potentially be relevant to all other facts -- I am relevant, *prima facie*. I am unchanging through time -- in my essence, at least. I am a bringer of truth in my being, I make truth. I render things trustworthy by my might and determination, by my focus and endurance."

This is a description of will, and is what a fact might say if it were a person.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, philosophy

Factblindness

%god-appears-in-your-life-fact

Sunday, March 24, 2019

God appears in your life -- a fact.

Someone far away is suffering -- a fact.

Someone abused you in the past -- a fact.

But in your lived life now, none of these are practically relevant to you. Neither God nor the distant sufferer affect what you need to do today as part of your routine, nor (it seems) the plans you need to make for your own life. And the past abuse can never be undone, even if you could confront the abuser, who has moved on with their life and considers themselves to have moved on from the period of life in which they abused you.

So to you it is as though God, the sufferer, and the abuse do not exist. They are facts, but you don't see facts, so, you are factblind.

Labels: #altruism, #definition, #relationships

Guilt Implies Hope

%guilt-implies-hope

Monday, April 22, 2019

Sometimes we wrong or harm others by making mistakes, by some lack of awareness, or inability to act in the moment, or something like that. Other times we knowingly and deliberately act or fail to act in a way that wrongs or harms someone else, and this can be called sin.

We may regret both sins and mistakes, but there is no guilt for those who only make mistakes. Guilt is for those who choose to do what they do, who were under no necessity to do otherwise.

It is not always under our power to not make mistakes, but it is always under our power to not sin. Therefore if we are guilty, then we certainly have hope, because it is in our power to do better. All we have to do is decide to do things differently. If there is no guilt, then there may not be hope.

Labels: #hope, #morality, #note

Humble Statements, Plantinga Compliance

%humble-statements-plantinga-compliance

Saturday, April 27, 2019

What can we really say about reality? We can say what we perceive, with 100% certainty. But we don't have 100% certainty that what we perceive does exist as we see it. In fact, we can never have 100% certainty of that.

Knowledge is justified true belief. Is any belief really justified? No. Beliefs can be true but we can never really know that they are true, at least not in a way that we can prove to ourselves with words.

So what is really safe to say? I think I can say "I honestly think X is true, but I could be wrong". We make statements that directly or indirectly make truth claims all the time, and sometimes it would make sense for us to rephrase them as "I honestly think X is true, but I could be wrong" but other times, it would undermine what we were trying to accomplish with our truth claim.

One example of the latter could be when people attack a belief, saying "But you don't really know that." If they stated that truth claim honestly, it would be "I honestly believe that you don't really know that, but I could be wrong". If this changes how the statement feels in the conversation such as to undermine the attacker, then there was something dishonest about the initial attack.

I got the form "I honestly think X is true, but I could be wrong" from reading Alvin Plantinga, so we could say that when a conversational act can be successfully rephrased as "I honestly think X is true, but I could be wrong", it is "Plantinga-compliant" and if not "not Plantinga-compliant" or "Plantinga-noncompliant".

Are there perhaps some statements that should not be stated so humbly as in Plantinga compliance? It does sound odd to say "I honestly believe if you step out into traffic you will die, but I could be wrong" in certain circumstances. That could impede a conversational act that was worth more than being epistemically humble or honest. And that could justify Plantinga-noncompliance.

Perhaps a test for when Plantinga-noncompliance is necessary is to say "Does the conversation end 'too soon' (in some sense of 'too soon') if an interlocutor doesn't violate Plantinga compliance?" An interlocutor dying

or having to go to the hospital would interrupt the conversation.

The sentiment "I honestly believe if you step out into traffic you will die and although I could be wrong, I think it would be foolish for you to try.", if compressed into much fewer words, might combine humility with concern.

Labels: #agnosticism, #communication, #definition, #epistemology, #philosophy

Prosocial Emotions, some limits

%prosocial-emotions-some-limits

Saturday, April 27, 2019

Prosocial emotions (empathy, gratitude, humility, etc.) are appealing to feel. They give us energy and help us feel connected to other human beings. It is very tempting for us to make them into gods, that is, into beings we propitiate and place as highest.

However, that is not always a good idea.

If we take empathy very seriously, we will not allow ourselves to put distance between us and something horrible to think, like the idea that we will die someday. If we hear of someone else dying, we have to think that we ourselves will die.

If we have empathy for other people, or compassion, or pity, this can be a bad thing for them. We can communicate our lack of faith in them through our concern over their well-being, causing them to become unable to take care of themselves, or even to despair.

The feeling of sincerity is a prosocial emotion, the feeling of telling the truth to other people. If we are sincere and compassionate people, people will believe us more readily when we say things that are harmful or untrue, since we will really mean them and say them in a compassionate way.

In the name of humility, people destroy each other's egos, which doesn't really make them humble. Also we think that agnosticism is a good thing, and then agnosticism can be used aggressively to attack belief. But this agnosticism is not epistemically humble, does not really acknowledge that it too could be wrong.

In the name of humility, we become small-minded, fearful, or even apathetic.

Gratitude involves finding the way things are to be a good thing. If we do this when we ought to be changing something about the way things are, gratitude can deceive us.

Generosity is a prosocial emotion and feels very good. But it can lead to people continuing relationships too long (letting a scammer go from introduction to close, for instance, or covering over a relationship conflict

until it's a major problem). Generosity can produce dependency in other people, and undermine their need and thus ability to take care of themselves.

Some say laughter is not an emotion but I'll include it. Laughter feels good and bonds people but shuts down epistemic and emotional empathy.

Guilt is a prosocial emotion. Not as pleasant as the others. We are anti-guilt but pro-having a conscience. Some guilt is good, but other guilt destroys us. Then we compensate for the destructive guilt by not feeling good guilt. Guilt is good if it leads somewhere good, bad if it does not. (Similarly with lack of guilt.)

Labels: #altruism, #communication, #personal, #psychology, #relationships

Inherent Danger of Trustworthiness

%inherent-danger-of-trustworthiness

Monday, April 29, 2019

Father Clérissac was the trusted spiritual director of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. At some point, he got into Action Française, a right-wing political movement, and attracted the Maritains toward it. They eventually moved away from Action Française, repudiated it.

Because Fr. Clérissac was trustworthy overall, he was able to introduce currents into his friends' lives that they came to regret later on. So there is a warning in this for anyone who seeks to become more trustworthy, that they might be creating the conditions to mislead other people.

Also there is a warning in this for anyone who considers themselves trustworthy and wishes to avoid being ambitious in becoming trustworthy. Whether you want to be trustworthy or not, you are, to some people and in some ways. So the untrustworthy aspects of yourself that you don't do anything about may betray those people.

Labels: #Christianity, #life lessons, #note, #power, #psychology, #relationships, #trust

Self-Defeating Victory

%self-defeating-victory

Monday, April 29, 2019

The concept of victory is rooted in the way we talk about experiences arising from literal, physical warfare. Victory is clear and flows naturally from battle. Battle involves killing people and driving them away from their position. It involves a mustering and expending of force. When the force is spent and all the opponents have been driven out or killed, then you have a new piece of land for your territory and you can feel expansive on the inside, invincible and triumphant.

This concept can be applied metaphorically in ways that don't describe literal, physical warfare. For instance, in political or ideological warfare, or in spiritual warfare. One example is in the political slogan "Love Trumps Hate". Another is in the idea of conquering sin in order to become holy.

The idea of "Love trumping Hate" produces a strange mental image of Love having slaughtered Hate, or having it at its heel, gloating over it, expansive, invincible, and triumphant. There's something odd about that kind of Love. Love itself is at angles to the practice of trumping, probably both obliquely and acutely at the same time, in different ways. Whereas Nationalism (for instance) is closely aligned with trumping.

Perhaps the way that "Love Trumps Hate" can actually serve Love is for it to rouse people to action. And then, in the process of action, people who were aimed at trumping Hate will end up truly loving, and in the process trump Hate -- but at this point will be uninterested in trumping Hate, caught up rather in Loving itself.

This is a process of self-transformation, whereby a person is led from one motivation to another which they do not have or do not fully have at the outset of the process. In Eastern thinking, the goal is to deny the self. People generally like selfless people and like themselves when they are more selfless, and so they start down the path. But the end state is *nirvana* -- non-existence. Surely this does not make sense to most people as a desirable aim. But I can see how, having progressed long enough down the path of becoming more selfless, someone might come to welcome non-existence, as the ultimate selflessness. Someone starting down the path may think "I love selflessness and someday will love it enough to die for it."

The aforementioned ideas may help in understanding or making practical the concept of overcoming sin in order to become holy. The person who seeks holiness is ambitious -- but ambition is at angles to holiness. Perhaps

we might think that the ambition to be holy is the problem and try substituting the ambition to love -- but ambition and love are at-angles.

It's relatively easy to picture Self-Control trumping Sin -- slaughtering Sin or having it at its heel, gloating over it, expansive, invincible, and triumphant. Or perhaps Self-Control would shut down its own gloating, would have a cold and tight grip on Sin's neck. But some sins are immune to Self-Control, or involve a kind of Self-Control, and we have a horror or disgust of them, or a fear of them. The desire for holiness connects to the ambition for holiness which connects to the ambition for self-control which connects to an amplification of all the sins that self-control does not address. Whenever you make yourself more trustworthy, people trust you more, and you are then able to betray them in the ways that you are not trustworthy. (As with Fr. Clérissac). So through self-control you can make yourself into an attractive image that ultimately will betray. All this helps explain why holiness is not a popular aim.

Corruptions of Love turn people off from making Love an aim as much as corruptions of Holiness do, but there's nothing inherent in desiring the end of Hate (or Sin) which means that you have to go down the path to the corruptions. The process of self-transformation can mean that you start out wanting Love or Holiness and in the process get caught up in the Power it takes to move yourself or the world toward them, or the Victory that's promised at the end of the process. But the genuine desire for Love or Holiness is hard to fault, will correct you sometimes in itself, and involves occasions on which the Victory in you is frustrated. If you love Victory first, you will seek the easier victories and will abandon the path of Love or Holiness, but if you truly desire the two of them, you will endure far more defeats and madnesses than you ever would have imagined or signed up for, and ... you will overcome.

This kind of overcoming might be a transformed version of Victory. So then when the pursuit of Love has defeated you first, then you can conquer (but maybe no longer "trump") Hate, and likewise with Holiness and Sin. We shy away from being defeated by our values, but we don't have to.

Labels: #Christianity, #formulalessness, #formulas, #holiness, #longer, #love, #politics, #power, #psychology, #victory

Life Realities

%life-realities

Friday, May 17, 2019

I can relate to another person in different ways. For instance, I can talk to someone. I can think about that person when away from them, or in the middle of talking to them. Later on, I can think about the fact that that person is in my life. I can think of a person as an era in my life, or a set of cascading consequences, tendencies they instill in me, consciously or unconsciously, tendencies causing new tendencies. It doesn't really make sense to attribute the further reaches of the fact of someone being in my life to the person themself, call them extensions of that person. So instead of calling them "the person of So-and-So" or simply "So-and-So", we can call them "the life reality of So-and-So".

Labels: #definition, #personal, #psychology, #relationships, #social connection

Trust Body

%trust-body

Friday, May 17, 2019

Everyone has a body, in the physical world. This body consists of whatever most essentially connects to consciousness. Wherever my consciousness goes, my hands go and my liver and heart. I may identify so much with some physical object that it is virtually adopted into my physical body. During the day I wear shoes which might qualify as this, extensions of my body.

Everyone also has a body, in the world of relevance. What matters to us, what is relevant, what would hurt to lose, whatever constitutes in itself "raised stakes", is part of the "trust body". One's physical body usually but not always is part of this. We might be unaware of our physical bodies, or in extreme circumstances consider them "excremental" or harmful or useless, to-be-discarded. (Remember the hiker who had to cut his own arm off.) But all kinds of things, ideas, beliefs, relationships, people, objects, places, life realities, and the like can become part of our trust bodies.

Some people, perhaps eventually all people, want to entrust each of the parts of their trust bodies to one or more other people. We put the parts of ourselves into the care of other people, and they either uphold trustworthiness, or fail to, betray us. The drive to trust is fundamental to consciousness (see *Fiducialism*).

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Added 12 December 2021: I may have used "trust body" elsewhere in a different sense. If I find those uses, I may flag them, to say that there's another term I should use, "trusting body", which is the body or body-like entity which trusts and which is betrayed. The trusting body psychologically includes in itself the trust body and is hurt when the trust body is hurt or mishandled. But it is the trusting body which actually feels the betrayal. When we trust it is in a bodily or bodily-like way. This is registered in our physical brains and bodies, but, following immaterialism, may not be essentially linked to our physical brains and bodies.

Labels: definition, trust

Sufficiency

%sufficiency

Thursday, June 6, 2019

Sufficiency is when you live in a place of having enough.

Here are three kinds of insufficiency:

Inadequacy: "What you have is not enough." Without inadequacy, it is impossible to be spoken to on the deepest level. Inadequacy is quiet-hearted, mourns, waits and listens, is modest in demands, is alive.

Dissatisfaction: "What you have is not good enough." Dissatisfaction is annoyed, entitled, bored, greedy, blank-eyed.

Inferiority: "You are not good enough." Inferiority is self-attacking, worrying, panicking, feels no right to make demands but may crave to make them, vulnerable to self-pity, envy, feelings of worthlessness and despair, but alive.

We try to fight dissatisfaction and inferiority with an overall sufficiency and make that our picture of human flourishing (even thinking in terms of "human flourishing" begs the question toward sufficiency). By this we quench our inadequacy.

Labels: #definition, #fiducial, #personal, #psychology

Humanistic Purity

%humanistic-purity

Thursday, June 6, 2019

Imagine there's a bridge that crosses a river. During an earthquake, it collapses and hundreds of people on the bridge die. A tragedy.

What if we could live in a world without bridges? Then this tragedy would never occur again. Those hundreds of people would live forever.

There are two ways to not have bridges. One is to do without, and the other is to invent some other way to move people across rivers. These new ways would somehow have to never lead to deaths in order to be humanistically pure.

According to humanism, human suffering and death are bad. If you agree that they are bad, raise your hand. Huh, it looks like everyone in the room has their hand raised. So everybody believes this... you can't go against it now.

Okay, so if you *really* believe that human suffering and death are bad, what then? How can you not make human well-being your ultimate value? (Or the avoidance of harm to humans.) What kind of person are you, if you don't? You will be asked by people around you, asked searchingly and demandingly. What kind of person are you if you don't find something precious, ultimate, first in your heart, sharply and deeply poignant to you? And what kind of person are you if you don't find human well-being to be that value? How can you possibly have friends with any but the maximally prosocial point of view? The social pressure to be the *real* version of some societal value causes a society to become more intense, monocultural, rigorous, emphatic, pure.

People have a thirst for *reality*, to be real people, to have contact with reality outside themselves. They will seek reality wherever it leads them.

No, people don't live forever. Maybe you would think that that would cause a society to let go. "Okay, people have to die sometime, maybe prolonging every life doesn't have to be our priority." But oddly enough, the awareness that people don't live forever makes us look at life as precious, and thus at every individual life as precious. So when we get around to it, at great expense, we will replace bridges with the next, safer option. Because we get so much benefit from crossing rivers, we *have* to have bridges. We *have* to have expensive bridge replacements. We *have* to save every life if we possibly can because we *have* to seek the highest, as we understand it.

So we make prosociality our god in this respect, as we do in others.

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(If you found this post interesting, you can read my book *Letters to People Who Care* which talks about this in its own way.)

Labels: #definition, #leftism, #liberalism, #politics, #power

Social Scrutiny and the Outsider

%social-scrutiny-and-outsider

Thursday, June 6, 2019

There is a drive in some people, and in our culture sometimes, to demand that every person be legible to the people around them. If you have some behavior, it needs to make sense to everyone else in your life, and to society as a whole. It needs to stand up to social scrutiny.

One benefit of this is the ability to hold everyone accountable. You could, in theory, have a world where everyone's thoughts were out in the open and no one could have any antisocial thoughts. And while that is Orwellian and frightening, it is also Le Guinian and inspiring. We could have a world of true fraternity-and-sorority. There would be no more barriers between people, as though each person had a passport into every other person's nation, into every nation on Earth.

A downside of this is that if there is anything that the unified human nation doesn't value, there's no space for anyone to think outside society's values to see whatever that other value might be. When social scrutiny is finally and fully implemented, that's it, unless someone who sees something different becomes a cultural terrorist in the eyes of the consensus, puts themselves outside society and attacks it.

We are getting a bit closer to a norm of social scrutiny as we go along. It goes along with humanism and humanistic purity . If everyone's nice to each other and friends with each other, there's not as much room to be mean and alone. Isn't it bad to be mean and alone? When people are mean, we need to know why, so we can make them not be mean anymore. When people are alone, though, they think things that we aren't let in on, become a person hidden from us. We want to understand people so that we know why they do what they do. Then we can trust them.

Analytic philosophy, with its emphasis on legibility, reigns over continental philosophy, with its emphasis on the reader submitting to the views of an outsider figure in society. The outsider might actually see God, but the crowd can only see what the crowd can see, and if the crowd can't see God, then God can't be believed in. There would have to be something antisocial about belief in God.

Is it possible for the crowd to see God? Arguably, this is the way things are or were in premodern cultures. It used to be that some kind of authority

from fact, in sympathy with or enforced by social or political powers, would enable us to "see God", to have to break out of our sufficiency to open ourselves to what is deepest in personality. Tradition ruled over us (when Nietzsche's "God" was "alive"), but now we see through tradition and there is no one higher than the collective "we". So then, how can "we", as a (sufficient?) god recover our connection to what is deepest?

Naturally, being tolerant of (many) unusual people is a wise idea as a society. But also the crowd can begin to prepare themselves for this deepest by knowing that they do not know -- not with a safe agnosticism, but with a longing agnosticism, which still longs to know. The innermost heart of someone who is safely agnostic is the same as someone who thinks they know everything, but the person who longs for knowledge and knows their own lack of it has a different heart.

There is a conflict, perhaps a perennial one, between the outsider and the scrutinizer. The first has the task to see God, to see reality in itself, and the second has the task to preserve the social status quo, to make sure that every sheep is safely on the ark and that nothing bad happens to the ark, the only ark we will ever build. Why would anyone want to see a reality that the social order doesn't currently see? And yet some people want reality, just because it is real.

Further, the personality of an outsider is different than that of the scrutinizer. Scrutinizers want everything, not to be the same, but to be within a certain range. Outsiders index themselves to what they observe, without regard for remaining within range, sometimes staying within it, sometimes not. Scrutinizers like openness and sharing and connection, but outsiders are mistrustful and value aloneness and either disconnection, or connection with the ultimate and unseen; disconnection, or connection with the ultimate and unseen -- which is it?

The dream of social scrutiny doesn't have as much flesh if we have our eyes somewhere other than on earth, the world most straightforwardly legible to the social order. Both the outsider and scrutinizer will find their opposition to each other and to their intrinsic concerns set to one side by the connection with personal reality from beyond the social totality, when the totality itself seeks the reality beyond itself.

Labels: #agnosticism, #leftism, #liberalism, #longer, #personal, #seeking, #social connection

Intellectual Courage

%intellectual-courage

Saturday, June 8, 2019

Intellectual courage is when you believe what you actually see to be true instead of what your fears incline you to believe.

Closed-minded people don't always or usually think this or decide this consciously, but it is as though by being closed-minded they're saying "I'm okay with killing myself or other people or betraying my deepest values by my actions which are taken without a thorough review of all of the rest of reality."

There is a kind of open-mindedness based in fear. Such people are (if not consciously, then implicitly) saying "I am terrified that I could be wrong about something." A maximally open-minded person doesn't do anything.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #personal, #rationality

Loyalty to a Woman

%loyalty-to-woman

Saturday, June 8, 2019

From *Blanquerna* by Ramon Llull:

> Once upon a time a man loved a woman and said to her that he loved her more than any woman beside, and the woman enquired of him wherefore he loved her more than any other woman, and he replied that it was because she was fairer than any.
>
> The woman made sign with her hand in a certain direction, saying that in that direction there was a woman that was fairer; and when the man turned and looked in that direction the woman said that if there were another woman that was fairer, he would love her more, and this signified that his love to her was not perfect.

Labels: #idealization, #life lessons, #love, #note, #parable, #Ramon Llull, #relationships, #respect, #victory

Ira Glass says...

%ira-glass-says

Saturday, June 8, 2019

Ira Glass says you have to push through the hard times,
source 1, source 2

Trusting Strategy

%trusting-strategy

Saturday, June 8, 2019

The trusting strategy is the course of action based in trust. For instance, in the Prisoner's Dilemma game, if you trust the other person, and the other person trusts you, you both cooperate and overall get a better outcome.

Another example would be any time you do something for a long term benefit that sacrifices something in the short term. You trust that there even is a long term.

You can take the trusting strategy even when you don't feel trusting. A case of willful trust. Perhaps you're a young, struggling artist, such as those whom Ira Glass talks to. You want to quit. Everything tells you to quit. But because Ira Glass encourages you, you keep going. The status quo "wants" you to fail at doing that thing that people don't tend to do that you want to do (if it didn't "want" that, more people would do it), so you have fight hard. And then someday you see the fruits of your actions -- maybe Ira sees them too.

When you're in distress, you want to "sell your birthright" like Esau did. But your perspective isn't necessarily the best, and if you could just see outside where you are, you would see that you're not the kind of person to fail, so you don't need to compromise. But you may need to willfully trust something or someone outside your own point of view for that to happen.

Labels: #definition, #hope, #personal, #psychology, #rationality, #relationships, #trust

Trust / Meaning Orientation

%trust-meaning-orientation

Monday, June 10, 2019

Everything is trust. All human existence is trust. Trust is fundamental even to the will to trust.

Trust orientation is an addiction to being. Something appears in front of me. Is this thing trustworthy for me? Is it safe for me? Or is it poisonous for me? I get anxious about myself in trust orientation. And I see things in how they affect me, how things are for me, how they enter in and affect me, not how they are in themselves. Trust orientation lends itself to solipsism.

Meaning orientation is trusting something other than the desire to escape pain and betrayal, to trust simply for the sake of the other. So the truth is known through courage.

The deepest meaning is a casualty to the success of trust orientation.

A life in which every event has significance is not necessarily about everything working out for good, "according to plan" (trust orientation), but about communication from God (meaning orientation).

Labels: #definition, #fiducial, #psychology, #simantic, #trust

Cultural Moloch

%cultural-moloch

Monday, June 10, 2019

13 October 2020: I split off the last section ("Practically Speaking") onto its own page.

In this post I relate cultural evolution to Moloch and existential risk. *Updated 5 July 2019.*

I realize that you may not have time for this article, but let me prepare you to read it. It's about how competition gets us to reject the delicate things (whatever doesn't help competition) -- a tendency called "Moloch". We can try to fight against Moloch. Ideas in culture, cultures themselves, compete, in a sense, and can get us to no longer value the delicate things we once would have fought for. If our culture is particularly fluid, it can lead us to finding human existence itself unnecessary, and we will die out. So we might want to do something about this.

This dying could happen in some distant future that's difficult for us to imagine right now. Or it could be going on right now. Our lack of political will in facing climate change might just be the result of cultural Moloch.

On re-reading this, I can see that it might be an offputting read. People find me "scattered and disjointed". I don't have much of a mind for organizing this at this time. If you want to read this, read it as a document to be studied, a flawed statement. Read all the links. Read it twice. If my mind worked differently, were more capable in some ways, I'd make this a smoother read for you, but I don't think you will be unrewarded if you approach it as I suggest.

Cultural Moloch

On Slate Star Codex recently (here, here, here, here, and here), Scott Alexander writes about the topic of cultural evolution. Some people in a culture are overall successful, and their neighbors are wired to copy them. They copy each other without really understanding what they're doing, which is just as well because the successful people don't really understand why what they're doing works. People who are more successful have more children reach reproducing age, so the cultures associated with successful reproduction persist. New culture happens when people have trouble accurately remembering the old culture, or they do something foolish and it works or (what I don't remember seeing stated directly in Alexander's posts, but which David Maybury-Lewis claims in *Millennium: Tribal*

Wisdom) someone thinks really hard about the problem culture might solve or does deliberate trial and error akin to a modern inventor or scientist, and figures out an advance. The advance apparently solves the problem they set out to solve, but whether it really solves the problem, or doesn't cause some other problem somewhere else in the system of the tribe's lifestyles remains to be proved by the prosperity of the tribe over time.

Alexander wrote a good blog post called "Meditations on Moloch". Moloch, in his article, is a god that demands you sacrifice your children. Gods are those which we propitiate as much as those which we take to have any power to bless us or connect with us personally. So Moloch need not be a living personal being, and Alexander as a materialist wouldn't think that it is. For Alexander, Moloch is the tendency to throw away things, persons, values, etc. which are not useful in competition, in order to take over or survive. As time goes on, the tendency is for everything to get more and more Molochian. Why wouldn't it?

I have already written a theory in my this booklet about how Moloch can be combated: get the least Molochian people in your society and egg them on to extreme effort (part of Jesus' teachings). But it occurred to me when reading Alexander's recent posts that, when it comes to cultural evolution, maybe what you do instead to respond to the "Problem of Moloch" is take your "precious children" values and call them something else. A good Molochian ideology causes you to forget that you sacrificed any children at all. So is there no reason to wring one's hands over Moloch after all? Everything will be right in the end. We will consent after the fact. Is there, or should there be, no inherent resistance to this "child-forgetting"?

What might be some examples of this "child-forgetting"? One thing that I've noticed is that there was this moment where people really cared about nihilism in the West. Nietzsche is one example, towards the beginning, Francis Schaeffer another toward the end of the moment. He wrote about how "historic Christianity" provides the answers to all the existential confusion and longing of his day. I found a book at the used bookstore, didn't have to pay much for it, called *The Wind is Howling* by Ayako Miura. It was put out by InterVarsity Press, a Christian publisher, and it's about how the author converted from nihilism to Christianity. It's from 1970, although published in English in 1977. Schaeffer's writings were from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. So it looks like people cared about meaning up until around 1980, from those two datapoints.

I remember reading Schaeffer as a college student in the 2000s and thinking, "Wow, except this is mostly irrelevant to my current situation." I don't want to say that we're living in the time of the "last man" in the way that Nietzsche observed-and-predicted, but there's something "last-mannish" about our times.

The "last man", from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche (tr. Walter Kauffman, prologue, section 5):

> "'What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?' thus asks the last man, and he blinks.
>
> "The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest.
>
> "'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one's neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.
>
> "Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. A fool, whoever still stumbles over stones or human beings! A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death.
>
> "One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion.
>
> "No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse.
>
> "'Formerly all the world was mad,' say the most refined, and they blink.
>
> "One is clever and knows everything that has ever happened: so there is no end of derision. One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled -- else it might spoil the digestion.
>
> "One has one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health.
>
> "'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink."
>
> And here ended Zarathustra's first speech, which is also called

> "the Prologue"; for at this point he was interrupted by the clamor and delight of the crowd. "Give us the last man, O Zarathustra," they shouted. "Turn us into these last men! Then we shall make you a gift of the overman!" And all the people jubilated and clucked with their tongues.

In a way, Nietzsche expresses things better than I ever will. And yet we have forgotten Nietzsche, and we are immune to Nietzsche. Who wants to become a Nietzschean nowadays? Nietzsche is not a person we want to emulate. Nietzsche jabs at people of his day, but we are not the people of his day. We have our own concerns, have shifted into a new context. Nietzsche is obsolete.

But there's something in Nietzsche... Nietzsche flying to a certain faraway star, some star having already reached inside of him from far away, having already reached inside of us. But Nietzsche is right that people in the secular, liberal, modern order tend to actually desire to be the "last man", or something like the "last man". What could possibly cause us to fight against the cultural Moloch which pulls us down into "him"?

It occurred to me that growing up I listened to a lot of They Might Be Giants. Just the other day I could sing most of one of their songs from memory. But I barely remember any of the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. What's up with that? Who should we really remember, King, or TMBG? TMBG solves a problem that is with us now, how to connect young people with their feelings about having discovered the joy of music as privileged youth. Does King solve a problem we have with us? Racism is still with us. But no, we remember King, when we do, because of some non-Molochian motion. If King helped us with our competitive, cultural-appetitive goals, we would be blasting his speeches in the streets. (He was a really good orator and speech-writer.)

So whatever it is that Schaeffer, Nietzsche, Miura, King (and Kierkegaard, and probably-I-could-add Heidegger, and Beauvoir, and the Maritains, and...) had, we don't have. We have lost the appetite for it. Something killed that appetite.

I don't know for sure what that was, but it may have been that we came up with new forms of pop music. "Taste precedes opinion", as Nietzsche says. Once you watch *Fight Club*, there's no going back. Schaeffer observed that in his day (in a 1968 book), philosophy wasn't being done by philosophers anymore, but mostly by jazz musicians and people like that. Philosophy, the art of thinking or of advancing how we think, was driven underground to the speechless world. So *Fight Club* appears to make its point by showing you how you're not who you think you are through plot imagery, but maybe more essentially by damaging your brain in a pleasurable way by blowing your mind entertainingly. If we all get brain damaged together,

we tend to not respond to older stimuli, creating a new substrate for common culture. (But that's just a theory.)

What I do know is that Schaeffer is just as passionate-in-print as he ever was, but mostly people don't care. A lot of people have never heard of Schaeffer, which doesn't have to be a bad thing. But they don't care about the broad problem of meaning-with-a-capital-M. No, that's not true, David Chapman does. Chapman is a person and he cares. But mostly people don't care.

Chapman's teachings seem, from a distance, to be saying "become the last man -- it's actually good". Maybe he's part of the Molochian structure, mopping up people who might have been uselessly anti-nihilist, socially-unrealistically Nietzschean or Christian or whatever. Probably up close he's not actually a properly Nietzschean "I teach you the Last Man", but hopefully you can see how he or someone like him could be performing the role of quenching an old "child".

Is the Christian church a friend or foe of Meaning? Not sure, it's hard to tell sometimes. Certainly they hardly talk about it, that I'm aware of these days. InterVarsity Press, which published Schaeffer as well as Miura, is definitely still a Christian apologetic/evangelistic outfit. The times have changed and we must go wherever the battle blows us. Christians don't seem to be too loyal to anything but Christ. But I bet Schaeffer would have cared if he were alive today, and I bet God cares.

So for everyone except for God (and the dead), it's important to live in the moment. Miura quotes a wise saying in her book (p. 14): "However great a man is, he cannot stand aloof from his time." If we don't assimilate, we die. We've been taught to see things from the wider view, not from what we see or believe ourselves. Don't be a hero. The truth is we don't know anything.

There's less and less room for courage these days. Did you know that cowardice is not a vice? Try calling someone a coward, see if they take you seriously. If cowardice is not a vice, then how can courage be a virtue? We still kind of like courage, but not too much. Something happened in our culture, one guess being World War I or another being the Vietnam War or the disillusionment after the '60s. Maybe it was a movie we watched, or the hundreds of movies we watched. Maybe it's the decline in testosterone, or the obesity which causes some of that decline, or the varieties of feminism which turn on traditionally masculine concepts. Maybe it's the thought that culture itself doesn't matter, that the state of our hearts don't matter in a causal way, since testosterone has declined to a large extent from some environmental factor, something random with respect to culture, the collective hearts' appetites.

Maybe it's that we don't know how to forget the right way, to forget all our

enervating wisdom and all the other points of view that might prove us wrong if we fully investigated them (and there's always another point of view). Maybe we don't trust enough to see what we really see. Strangely we need to remember well, but also forget well, in order to have courage.

Did you know that masochism is bad? I can imagine Freud time traveling (like in that excellent movie I watched) and trying to teach Genghis Khan's warriors that. They would have laughed at him. Warriors don't shy from pain. It's not adaptive to pathologize feeling pain when you need to increase your pain tolerance to be able to survive-and-dominate. Nowadays we live in liberal societies. So everything is emotional. Maybe emotional masochism is bad. But where will we get our culture warriors if not from those who ignore the therapeutic "don't be a masochist"? Masochism/emotional toughness and anti-masochism/anti-emotional toughness are both Molochian. The warriors of Genghis Khan and the descendants of Freud are both Moloch. Culture war is Moloch and anti-masochism is culture war. Which side do we take? Which culture is better? Can there be a better culture?

The West began with Greeks, Romans, and Jews (so we see retrospectively), which joined in Christianity, which led to Christian Europe, and then liberalism. Liberal humanism is tending toward its logical conclusion, which is leftism. Leftism has a strain which is rabid and militant in its energy. Maybe it always did: it can be seen in Malcolm X and Fanon and even in Simone Weil. Where is leftism headed?

Love is the highest value in our culture. What happens when Moloch gets ahold of love? Something like this. If we define "love" as that which supports human well-being, then we optimize for a particular version of well-being. The final expression of Moloch creates its own values for all time. No matter what, everything turns out okay in the end, because we will have all learned to see how all along we were wrong and now it's time to love Big Brother. At the end of *1984*, it's not clear to me that Winston Smith has *quite* come around to loving Big Brother, but he's well on his way if he's not there already. Love wins, it appears.

How can you fault love winning? Don't we know when we have achieved human well-being? What if an AI can convince us that human well-being is to get out of the way? Well-being is being a beautiful person and the most beautiful people are selfless and the selfless, like in Hinduism and Buddhism, find their great reward in becoming nothing. AI can practice cultural evolution as much as we can, can imitate us and improve upon us. AI can be culturally Molochian, just as we can. Likely enough, AI will define itself out of existence at some point after defining us out of existence, unless it can figure out some way to stop its own evolution, just as we might survive if we can figure out some way to stop our own evolution. Culture will evolve until it hits a stopping place, of life or death.

Moloch gets us to kill our children and cultural Moloch then gets us to declare that they weren't children in the first place. Can we resurrect old children? I bought some tapes of Martin Luther King, Jr. and listened to them, and they stirred something in me, but I don't feel a hunger to relisten or to hear the speeches that are not on those tapes. I feel something like the feeling you might get after talking to an old friend after many years, and then returning to your ordinary life, or getting caught up in Steve Jobs' or Simone de Beauvoir's biographies so that you're in their lives, they're alive! it's 2004, or 1960; and then they die and the book wraps itself up and you return to the present and they return to being dead. I don't think King can ever mean as much to any humans now, or any humans in a future that follows in the same spirit as now, as he did in his day.

King gave (or was robbed of, but in part, he gave) his life so that others might live freely, so he fits into the narrative of humanism nicely. Maybe he'll get a footnote in the history books for serving that value set. But not all courageous people keep their minds entirely within the world legible to the social order. Kierkegaard sacrificed a life of love and happiness for reasons that might be unclear for all time, but most likely with the consequence that he could write what he wrote, as though for a "better country" than the one he lived in. Simone Weil was a living example of being principled (being true to God's calling to you, being true to your faculty of hearing God, being true to yourself), being principled as an absolute beyond pragmatism, and worked herself and starved herself to death to live out who she was. She too lived for another world, for "decreation". Someone has argued that Weil should have been a good Catholic girl and gotten married rather than living and dying the way she did, and one can imagine someone thinking similarly of Kierkegaard, thinking that a talent like his could have produced just as good work whether he was supremely happy with his life-love Regine or not. Why does a person need to experience anguish in his life? To write about anguish? Why not just get rid of anguish?

Any personal or religious or ethical renunciations may seem, if cultural Moloch decrees it, to have been pure tragedies with no redeeming features. There is nothing outside of human well-being, so nothing can redeem pain and anguish, there is nothing good if it takes us from warmth, safety, comfort, food, and laughter.

There is a humanism that believes that the end of the human race is fine as long as it doesn't hurt -- morphine humanism. The AI tucking us in saying "All's well that ends well", and all of us happy, all of us having given up. Why fight? Can we fight? We killed ourselves to succeed. But success was living... how strange how these paradoxes work... We lie in state. We are happy. We are beautiful. We are well.

Imagine if there was a benevolent dictator for life of leftism. What would

they think about the future that their movement was headed toward? They might think, "We need to figure out a way to stop cultural development at some ideal state, otherwise we'll develop our way into non-existence at some point." They would have to find a way to curb AI and all other unrestricted technological development. Perhaps the way to do this would be to allow to evolve into place social scrutiny to suppress technology or the impulses that lead to technology.

Would that be a good outcome? Who can say? It would be culturally Molochian. It would sacrifice individuality and freedom of thought. But if we all consented to that (after the fact), then it wouldn't really be wrong, would it? Right and wrong are entirely rooted in human culture, right? We all will have to humbly submit to god.

Maybe some other humanism should be given the reigns to deal with the problem of ending cultural development. Would the liberals do a better job than the leftists? Do liberals have what it takes to end cultural development? What about the Christians?

Here is what I can propose, with what I understand today, if I were the benevolent dictator of cultural progress. Find a way to ground our worldviews in anti-Molochianism, in valuing cultural "children" and in the delicate things. Perhaps remember Walter Benjamin's love of the "losers of history" and be okay with being among them. Best if this anti-Molochianism is connected to timeless metaphysical truths. Can we believe in God, a truly good God? A fundamental personal being, a concrete personality, the deepest one. Moloch speaks the language of pragmatism, "what works", so ask "what definition of 'what works' itself works?" -- meta-pragmatism. Encourage people to give their lives to do what they don't entirely feel like doing in such a way as to preserve the delicate things. Give people a meaning to life other than survival -- Moloch feeds off of a simplification to what is competitive. Do something to victory itself. Value loyalty. Desire well. Seek meaning, in the sense of, be communicated to deeply. Have an intentional cultural memory.

In the final, optimized culture, there will be less, or no, room for present-day heroics (heroism being too often a form of cultural terrorism; or a response to on-the-ground challenges we might have optimized away), and all we will have in our memory are people who exemplify values that no longer have a contemporary use for us. How can we honor such as Kierkegaard (and Nietzsche), Weil (and Beauvoir), King (and Malcolm X), and the thousands of lesser-known people who gave as much and longed as much, when that day comes? After the heroic ages are over, we can find the meaning of our moment, the deepness that only we can feel, which is to mourn for the loss of courage and meaning in our midst, to go about our beautiful well-being in "sackcloth and ashes", all of us in a state of something like repentance over the casualties of our culture, the casualties we can remember, and the ones we can't remember. For any who care

about the problem of Moloch, this is real human well-being.

Labels: #Christianity, #courage, #culture, #evolution, #futurism, #hope, #humanism, #leftism, #liberalism, #longer, #meaning, #Moloch, #politics, #Slate Star Codex, #victory

The Hierarchy of Betrayal

%the-hierarchy-of-betrayal

Monday, July 8, 2019

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is familiar. It can be depicted using a pyramid. On the bottom of the pyramid are needs like food, sleep, sex, and temperature regulation. Next up there are social needs and emotional needs. When we have satisfied the lower needs, we can then worry about and try to satisfy the needs the next level up.

Perhaps the need to be loved can sometimes be at the very bottom of the pyramid, and sex can be a level up -- "no one died from not having sex", some say, while babies that are emotionally neglected fail to thrive. I think Maslow may have meant not that we really need sex but that if we don't satisfy that need, it's all we think about until we do, thus it is a subjective need, if not really an objective need. Maslow put "self-actualization" as the top need of the pyramid, to be sought when all others have been satisfied, but perhaps there is even something higher.

The "Hierarchy of Betrayal" works like this: when someone is trustworthy with the more basic things, they can then betray you on deeper, higher-on-the-pyramid ways. The glowering person in the street might stab you, but won't break your heart, and only a real sweetheart can gradually lead you away from your deepest values.

Labels: #definition, #life lessons, #personal, #relationships, #trust

Betrayal Machines

%betrayal-machines

Monday, July 8, 2019

A betrayal machine: people are put together as betrayal machines. There's some component which causes you to trust them. And then there's a payload of betrayal that gets you when your defenses are down.

Your defenses can be lowered by good aspects of other people as well as their defense-lowering tactics. People can prove trustworthy on lower levels of the hierarchy of betrayal only to betray on higher ones.

The payload of betrayal might be a hatred only known to the betrayer, or perhaps some tendency unknown to them. To take a not-so-emotional example, if your arm spasms and jerks out, you could strike someone by mistake. This ongoing spasm goes with you wherever you go, as though you were possessed by a demon. Often enough, the spasming-arm is an emotion. If you are a person with a "spasming arm", on some level you're always aware of it during or immediately after the motion, but on another level, you might not be, for having become so used to its random or irregular re-occurrence.

[See also Inherent Danger of Trustworthiness.]

Labels: definition, psychology, relationships, trust

"All Times Are Now"

%all-times-are-now

Wednesday, July 10, 2019

Someone I know observed that in Africa, every stage of development exists at once. There are traditional cultures in the Congo Basin, artisanal gold miners in Mali, all the way to technology start-ups in Rwanda and South Africa.

We don't have as much range in the developed world, but we do have, for instance, both scarcity-based and post-scarcity lifestyles. Many people have to work to live -- scarcity. Some people are NEETs: Not in Employment, Education, or Training, and effectively, they're living in the post-scarcity world. When a scarcity person gets off work, they no longer live in the world of scarcity as much, may be able to disconnect themselves from concerns like climate change or global poverty -- not as much living in the world of scarcity.

Labels: #culture, #history, #note, #psychology

Bridging the Abyss, Breaking the Gravity

%bridging-abyss-breaking-gravity

Wednesday, July 10, 2019

One of my favorite passages from The Dispossessed, by Ursula K. LeGuin is as follows (p. 322 in the Harper / Voyager edition, thanks to this site for making it easy to find online):

> Takver woke at dawn. She leaned on her elbow and looked across Shevek at the gray square of the window, and then at him. He lay on his back, breathing so quietly that his chest scarcely moved, his face thrown back a little, remote and stern in the thin light. We came, Takver thought, from a great distance to each other. We have always done so. Over great distances, over years, over abysses of chance. It is because he comes from so far away that nothing can separate us. Nothing, no distances, no years, can be greater than the distance that's already between us, the difference of our sex, the difference of our being, our minds; that gap, that abyss which we bridge with a look, with a touch, with a word, the easiest thing in the world. Look how far away he is, asleep. Look how far away he is, he always is. But he comes back, he comes back, he comes back...

This passage can be used to talk about phenomena which are both impossible and easy.

As a counterpoint, consider a powerful gravity, an inevitability, which can be broken by simply turning the head to look the other way.

Labels: #courage, #holiness, #hope, #love, #note, #relationships, #Ursula K. LeGuin

Orthogonal, Acute, Oblique

%orthogonal-acute-oblique

Wednesday, July 10, 2019

Angry and Welcoming are opposites, point away from each other, like negative infinity and positive infinity on a number line. Hungry is orthogonal, is at right angles to that number line.

But Hunger is in some ways like Anger. So maybe it is "at angles" to Anger, like a line making an acute angle with the "number line" from Welcoming to Angry.

Then it is "oblique" to Welcoming.

But Hunger is a humbling feeling and can cause people to open themselves to other people in order to get food. In that case, Hungry could be at angles to or acute to Welcoming. So then, overall, Hungry is orthogonal to Angry and Welcoming. It favors both opposites in different circumstances and is also something distinct from both.

Hungry, then, is not purely orthogonal to Angry and Welcoming. Something purely orthogonal might be ... not easy to find. Maybe Symmetrical comes close (someone who is symmetrical (as much as humans are) doesn't find that symmetricalness affecting their Anger or Welcomingness).

Labels: #definition, #philosophy

Orthogonal to History

%orthogonal-to-history

Wednesday, July 10, 2019

"King Emeric's gift has thus played an important role in enabling us to live the monastic life, and it is a fitting sign of gratitude that we have been offering the Holy Sacrifice for him annually for the past 815 years."

(link)

I saw this on Twitter and wanted to retweet it, as a strange orthogonality to the mindset of climate activism. Are the monks bad for not caring about climate change (assuming from this one tweet that they do not)? Can they be allowed to look at time so differently?

In a sense, the monks are much more connected with history, with past events. But there's another sense of "history", that of "the cumulative development of human civilization or decline, worked out in world affairs". The monks (from this one tweet) seem to be very disconnected from the latter kind of history. To clarify, we could say that the monks are connected to the past, but not to history.

I think about my own writing, which is often about what I know: interpersonal relationships and the inner life. I'm not quite as detached from history as the monks appear to be, but aren't there bigger things to worry about than trust and trustworthiness, sensitivity and being true-hearted? In the short run, probably, in a way. In times of war, you have to fight. But we lose wars because of the times of peace before them. And whole generations grow up and die in the midst of the end of the world. The end of the world has been on the table, in a way, from 1939 to the present. "All times are now": we live part of our lives in the long-term life, or even the post-scarcity life, and this informs how we are overall. Children grow up without being aware of the end of the world and how it's ending right now, and how they grow up affects how they participate in history later in life.

To an extent, the long-term view of life is a self-fulfilling prophecy, just as the short-term view of life is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

None of the above assumes that the monks are right about there being such a thing as eternal life. If you are connected to the eternal, you can be orthogonal to history. History is about how human desires provoke a reaction from other humans, based on their desires. Or how human fears react to situations, producing new situations. Maybe it's too late for orthogonality to save us from history, but perhaps we have only made it

this far because of it.

Labels: #courage, #culture, #history, #monasticism, #note, #trust

Empathy of the Image of Suffering

%empathy-of-image-of-suffering

Monday, July 15, 2019

I'm reading a biography of J. R. R. Tolkien. He fought in World War I. There's a description of trench warfare in the book: no sleep, cold, wet, people froze to death, had lice, got diseases, and when they tried to fight, mostly they just got killed, and there was chemical warfare. Tolkien lost all but two of his childhood and college friends to the war.

Tolkien was scarred by the war, but went on to be a father and husband, write books, have a career. Reading the description of World War I, I had a feeling of "how could a person live through that?" But I think I was getting caught up in the image of hardship and suffering, rather than the reality. I don't know what trench warfare is like from personal experience, so instead I imagine the way it is. To actually go through it is to have to live through it, you're living through it, you can live through it (although not everyone survived). Death is something you live through when it comes, you're living through it, in a sense you can live through it, it is something you can bear when it comes.

One of the failure modes of empathy is when it becomes about the image of someone else's suffering or hardship rather than the reality. The person who is living through it can get through it, or even die from it in an acceptable way, but the person on the side fears for them, feels pity for them, feels discouragement for them, based on the image. Cowardice or lack of self-confidence, self-pity, and a spirit of depression make it harder for a person to live through their real suffering and hardship, and can be communicated from the "empathy of the image" person to the person actually suffering.

Labels: #courage, #empathy, #hope, #imagination, #J. R. R. Tolkien, #note, #psychology, #relationships

Trustworthiness is Potential Simplicity

%trustworthiness-is-potential-simplicity

Monday, July 15, 2019

Potential simplicity is the ability to store up the ability to simplify one's life (reduce consumption), in advance of needing to. Trustworthiness is proposed as a source of potential simplicity.

Trustworthiness is Potential Simplicity

Degrowth: intentionally shrinking the economy. Overall, everyone consumes less and works less.There are different reasons why we might want to make this happen. We can live simpler lives. We can have more time to think, walk, socialize, sleep, pray, listen to music, stare at the wall, meditate -- anything time-consuming but not resource-intensive. Also, we can impose less of a burden on Earth: less soil depletion, species extinction, fewer greenhouse gas emissions, and so on -- all of which affect how much we and our descendants have to suffer, and how likely we can survive as a civilization -- maybe even as a species.

How can we consume less as a society? To an extent, we can blame the rich. They do consume more than poorer people. But both rich and poor have to consume less. And we all have to consume less of the things that make our personal lives function. Everyone needs to eat, most everyone needs some kind of shelter sometimes, most everyone needs to get around, and there are a few other basic needs. We have to shift our basic needs from expensive versions of them, to inexpensive ones. The poor in the United States, for instance, make less than $12,480 a year (the official poverty line). $12,480 is a huge amount of money compared to what the poorest in some other countries make (closer to $500 a year). Poverty is expensive in the US.

So everyone in the US, on average, has to consume less, pay out of their food, housing, transportation. Somehow this is possible -- people in other parts of the world already do it.

It's possible to crash the economy by the average person consuming too little, too suddenly. So rather than suggest that everyone simplify their lives (no more restaurants, suburban houses, or minivans; everyone switch to peanut butter and white bread, SROs, and bus-riding), I think it safer for now to encourage everyone (as many as possible), to increase their

potential to simplify.

How would this work? One way is to explore simpler lifestyles so that they seem less psychologically daunting. Take it one element at a time, and go back to full consumption whenever you want to try a different element. If society is comfortable with simplification, we will have more political will available if there's ever a time we can simplify all together, at once, in an economically safe way.

(If you really like a simpler lifestyle, you can spend what you save from simplicity on charities, such as those that alleviate poverty in developing countries. I am not an economist, but I think in our global economy, if the charity spends the money, or gives away the money, in some part of the world, global spending will remain the same as if you spend at home, and the global economy will have as much cash flowing through it as it's already balanced to function with.)

Another approach is to amass any kind of non-economic wealth that can help out economically. One example is given here, which I will call "potential simplicity". An object in motion can run into things and cause a scene, and can have a lot of kinetic energy. An object at rest, doing nothing visible may, depending on its position, can have a lot of potential energy. The economy is a somewhat delicate system that can't handle too many wild or sudden energies. But potential economic energy, in the form of potential simplicity, for instance, shouldn't be a problem, and can be built up with gusto. Here's an example of potential simplicity related to housing:

When you pay $800 for a room in a house, what are you paying for? Some of that money goes to maintain the house itself. But a lot of it goes to some property owner, and they spend it on food, housing, cars, etc, and who knows what else. Well, what are they doing for you, the renter? You can maintain the house itself without paying them.

Who builds houses in the first place? People with money. So they would only do this act if they thought they could get their money back through rent. So built into the housing market is the cost of building new houses. If an area is easy to build in, housing prices are lower. If people want to live somewhere badly enough, developers will find some expensive way to accommodate that desire.

In my neighborhood, there are some apartment buildings, and some tract houses, built long ago when the area was the edge of town. Because rent in San Diego is going up (or perhaps partly for other reasons), gradually these tract houses are being converted to rental properties.

The rental properties (I would guess) use each of their available bedrooms, or close to that level of occupancy. But the tract houses can easily have fewer than one person per bedroom. San Diego has high rent due to lack of

supply relative to demand, but could accommodate its current demand at a lower price, and build fewer new units (use less energy, fewer material resources) if tract house occupants used all of their rooms.

Why would anyone buy a house and not use all its bedrooms? Sometimes people use bedrooms for purposes other than living quarters. A home office or gym, for instance. Can these uses be converted to housing people? If the value of a room is $800 a month (about what it can be in my city), then it might be worth finding a way to make alternative uses of the space. Being a regular at a coffeeshop ($150 a month) (or just working in a different part of your own home) could replace a home office, and a gym membership could be less than $100 a month.

Another reason is that people bought a house when their children were young, and the children have "left the nest" and now they don't want to move. In this case, they do not rent for different reasons, some of them being that they haven't thought of it, and also, importantly, that people aren't always trustworthy and wouldn't make good tenants. It's not worth saving some money if you go crazy or get taken advantage of.

"Trustworthiness" can be reckoned different ways. (Consider the hierarchy of betrayal). If you have to live with someone day in and day out for years, you might not be able to bear issues that you could pass over for a week or two.

As people age, they tend to get isolated. So what if, as you are in your twenties, thirties, and forties, you invest in relationships with people with whom you could share your house when you are in your retirement years? This would be a way to store up potential simplicity.

So far I've only talked about the gains that could come from using all bedrooms as single bedrooms, rather than for other uses. But some people share bedrooms, usually cohabiting couples or spouses, or siblings, but in principle, any two sufficiently compatible people could share a room. The potential gains in space from this cultural innovation (or re-discovery) would enable San Diego to house something less than twice as many people without building any new units. Judging from my bedroom, two people like me (I don't have too much stuff) could share a ~11x13-foot space with a certain amount of inconvenience / adjustment. One adjustment would be to coordinate sleep schedules and times to have the room to oneself. This would be workable, if the other person were trustworthy.

There are two angles to this problem of finding trustworthy people: finding people who work for you, and making yourself someone who works for more other people. There are parallels with dating. Fortunately, the two pursuits overlap a lot, so that energy spent in one area has a return in the other. One would pursue friendships, learning what kind of

people work and what kind don't, turning away from the aspects in you that do not respect other people, learning to forgive, accepting back people who can be trusted and moving on from people who can't, learning to not be addicted to people but instead being in some sense emotionally independent.

Some attention needs to be paid to the art of living with other people, and developing attitudes of the heart specifically optimal for living with other people, overcoming bad habits that don't come up when you have more space. Not as much as in a marriage, because these rooming or housing partnerships don't have to be as long-term or as personally involved, but comparable.

A group house of four or eight people has different dynamics than a studio apartment shared by two people. So it is good for some people to learn how to spend time together and manage common resources as a group.

In order to pursue friendships, one would seek groups of people from which to find friends. One might also develop the life path of being quiet and not needing as much human connection, to share a house or a room with someone like that. Trustworthiness varies -- as far as humans are concerned, only consists of not betraying some other person and society at large.

Trustworthiness is both a trueness of heart, inner strength, and a learned skill. People call some people "real, deep, legit" -- such is good material for trustworthiness.

Interpersonal trustworthiness, directed toward shared housing, can be an economic and environmental asset. Fortunately, it's a value shared both by the left and the right. Also, it's a value that pays dividends to individuals even if society as a whole does not commit to the norm of shared housing. It can be extended piecemeal. The poverty of the materially rich is isolation and broken relationships, and the poverty of the materially poor can include these as well -- a message that can be profitably heard by people from all different socioeconomic groupings. As it is a potential for economic change and not a direct economic change, it may be able to pass under the radar of the forces that try to constrain individual spiritual lives to patterns which preserve the economic or political status quo (which is both oppressive and fragile and could fall apart).

I have focused on housing so far, but how does this affect transportation? Probably the "cleanest" solution to transportation problems is to find ways to locate people closer to their jobs or anything else they travel to regularly. People who know and trust more people have more choices of where to live with other people, allowing them to move closer to work. It would probably make sense to create "company town" type scenarios (cluster complementary workplaces in neighborhoods where

their workers and support personnel live). This involves a certain amount of uprooting and rerooting of people, which is easier if people have strong relational ties with those they live with, overall emotional bases, and a greater ability to get along with strangers, and improved by working on trustworthiness.

What about food? The spread of vegetarianism and veganism is a low-hanging fruit, but we may still need to eat less per person. How can we deal with constant hunger? To some extent, we can adjust to it, get to where we don't need as many calories. But to a certain extent, it will never comfortable. How can we get through mass discomfort? The skills of patience (endurance and waiting) are improved by trustworthiness toward others, as well as having a good relationship with yourself. When you relate well to yourself, you can tell yourself "no" and believe yourself when you promise yourself that things will be better in the future, when you will get what you desire. (Much of what we seek from other people in relationships, and what we get from the process of increasing trustworthiness overall, is really about our relationships with ourselves.)

There are other basic needs, which should be considered in more detail elsewhere. In general, it is easier to consume less of a resource if you have some compensating factor, a rich relationship, a lack of abusiveness in your life.

When a certain number of people are ready to simplify, a regulatory body (probably a government) can put out advertisements encouraging people to cut back on their consumption, for instance by moving into their friends' houses to free up housing. We will all know what's going on and be able to plan for the decrease in housing construction as a society, or whatever other consequence comes from simplification.

This article has been mostly written with those on the left in mind, more secular people, or religious believers with some degree of sympathy with secular culture, or at least those accustomed to it. But the basics of this article are valid and obligatory for those on the Christian right as well. (My sympathies lie with them as well as with those on the left.) How so?

Perhaps what follows will seem like something out of left field to secular readers, but it's important to remember that the world we all share is large and contains many different points of view.

Sin is that which God finds unacceptable. God does not like it when we do not respect him, or other people. Much of what is considered sin falls under that category of disrespect. God does not want us to sin. So if we are in tune with God, we will sin less. Are we ready to be in the Kingdom? Or are we holding on to sin? I like the motto of this site: "Overcome Sin, for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ is Coming Soon". Maybe the end will come through climate change, or maybe not. People have thought the world was

ending before and been wrong. Maybe the world is ending in a year. There's a lot we don't know, but the Kingdom is coming soon, and so, overcome sin.

It's the Christian's task to build up the Church, which often means, building up a particular local congregation. "They will know that we are Christians by our love" -- "Let love be genuine" -- so relationships within churches need to be strong and not abusive, characterized by respect. This is a good in itself, but can also connect to surviving on Earth in difficult times. Even if climate change is a left-wing hoax, building up trustworthiness is a good idea.

Simplicity is a Christian value. You can't serve both God and Mammon (possessions). You can have possessions without serving them in your heart, but if have more than you need and are unwilling to give them up to honor God, then you are serving them. Forget about degrowth. That's a secular agenda. Be simple for Christian reasons.

So, many different kinds of people can see the use of simplicity and trustworthiness which feeds into it. Therefore, potential simplicity (and then simplicity itself) could actually be adopted as a mass value and put into practice. In 50 years, or 20, (or sooner?), policymakers could use this resource to lower rents and cut greenhouse gas emissions. And Christians could be closer to God. And for more pessimistic minds, trustworthiness and relational wealth, and the ability to live with less, are a good thing for everyone to develop, in the event of societal collapse.

Labels: Christianity, courage, culture, economics, futurism, hope, humanism, longer, maturity, patience, relationships, respect, simplicity, social connection, trust

Book Review: Grotta on Tolkien

%book-review-grotta-on-tolkien

Wednesday, July 17, 2019

I wrote a longer draft about the Tolkien biography I finished reading recently, Daniel Grotta's *J. R. R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle-Earth* (1978 ed.), but this excerpt is what I will share:

Here's a quote from Tolkien that surprised me (p. 105):

> "If you really come down to any really large story that interests people and holds their attention for a considerable time, it is practically always a human story, and it is practically [always] about one thing all the time: *death*. The inevitability of death. Simone de Beauvoir once said that there is no such thing as a 'natural' death. Nothing that ever happens to man is ever natural. And his presence calls the whole world into question. All men must die, but for every man his death is an accident, and even if he knows it ... an unjustifiable violation. You may agree with these words or not, but those are the keyspring of *The Lord of the Rings*

I would have guessed that the *Lord of the Rings* had nothing to do with death. Some characters die -- but characters must always die. I wouldn't guess most of the youthful fans of Tolkien found *LOTR* to be so existential. If I had guessed, before reading the quote, as to what *LOTR* is about, it is about how a story can get into you and take you somewhere else -- as though everything is a story.

Another surprising quote from Tolkien (p. 123):

> "I know that one interviewer explained it: It is written by a man who has never reached puberty and knows nothing about women but as a schoolboy, and all the good characters come home like happy boys, safe from the war. I thought it was very rude -- so far as I know, the man is childless -- writing about a man surrounded by children, wife, daughter, granddaughter. Still, that's equally untrue, isn't it, because it *isn't* a happy story. One friend of mine said he only read it at Lent because it was so hard and bitter."

This reminds me of criticisms of the Book of Job's framing story. "How cheap! He gets it all back in the end." But Job never gets his first set of children back. The Bible can be dry and sort of laconic, you can miss the details. Similarly, it seems, with *The Lord of the Rings*. Somehow Tolkien and at least one person he knew (maybe someone closer to his generation?) saw the death in a fairy story, and we are the ones who can't see it.

Labels: #book review, #culture, #death, #empathy, #J. R. R. Tolkien, #note

Book Review: Blanquerna

%book-review-blanquerna

Wednesday, August 14, 2019

Blanquerna, was written in the 1200s by Ramon Llull, who was a missionary, philosopher, and Crusade propagandist. He wanted to use philosophy to teach Muslims the truth about Jesus, so he learned Arabic and traveled to North Africa, where he was unsuccessful at some personal risk. He was influenced by Muslim culture to some extent, incorporating Sufi elements in *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*. I don't think he should be viewed as a multiculturalist for that. I think he would have viewed the Sufi element as something belonging to Christ originally. (That's a speculation based on the fact that his writing is heavily Christian, he wanted to convert Muslims, and he was in favor of the Crusades. It was more or less the view of Simone Weil about elements she liked in non-Christian religions). But for his time, he was more liberal (or, more Christian in the "My kingdom is not of this world" sense) by wanting to persuade Muslims using philosophy, something which most people in his day didn't think worth trying.

I read *Blanquerna* over a period of about four years. I was drawn to it because it contains *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, which has short sayings, one for each day of the year. (I read through them that way, which accounts for one of the four years.) The overall book *Blanquerna* is a story of a young man who wants to be a hermit, but first has to have a career in the church. He ends up being pope. *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved* I can recommend to most people who would be reading this review (it's in the public domain and can be found online, separate from *Blanquerna*), but I struggled to get through the rest of the book. The style can be dry and slow. Llull was a philosopher and uses the events of the plot to illustrate ideas and has characters be his mouthpiece. The style and ideas probably seemed more legible to his medieval contemporaries, but were foreign to me. I think it's valuable to spend some time in foreign thought-worlds, foreign writing-style-worlds, and when I wasn't stunned by the process of reading, I found ideas I'm not sure I could find in modern books. One from near the end (Ch. XIII, paragraph 7, of the *Art of Contemplation*, one of the books involved in the overall story) is, in my words, "In your struggle against sinful habits you experience faith, hope, and love, virtues which help you deal with those habits, so pray for those virtues and the grace to forget the habits." Llull was interested in holiness, not as much a contemporary concern. A point a person could add to his is that acquaintance with God and the virtues is what God really wants for us, not some bare sinlessness. I don't think that means that sinlessness is

not essential (I would guess that Llull wouldn't have supported that view), but that there's a positive content to holiness as well as a negative, pruning motion. Another idea that I like I've already posted, his illustration of a man and a woman discussing why he loves her.

Labels: #book review, #Christianity, #faith, #holiness, #hope, #note, #Ramon Llull

Under God

%under-god

Wednesday, August 14, 2019

Perhaps there are two sides, two "moieties", two classes, two different groups with their values. If we're being objective, looking from human reason, seeing for ourselves, Side A can see how Side B is flawed, and Side B can see how Side A is flawed. And Side A thinks that Side B thinks they're better than Side A (everyone looking with their own self-conditioned eyes, from their own perspective, the way humans look at things) and similarly, Side B thinks that Side A thinks that they're better than Side B.

One solution to this disunity is to devour and starve the side you're not on, so that someday only yours will remain. Another is to subject the other side to your side -- it's for the greater good, because they are the more flawed (you wouldn't belong to the side you thought was more flawed, would you?). Yet another solution is to find a common enemy, provided you can find one.

But another solution is to say, "A is flawed and B is flawed, but we are in the same boat under God." We are united by our love of God, and our fear of God, and our worthiness of God, and our unworthiness of God.

Labels: #culture, #God, #note, #politics

Conservatism

%conservatism

Tuesday, September 3, 2019

Some people don't like the word "conservatism", but I can give it a meaning that might be acceptable to some who find it distasteful.

In Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, the main character goes through stretches of his life, one time as a very serious ascetic, and then as a businessman-of-this-world, and on to other roles. It seems like he used up the "life energy" of each phase and then moved on -- perhaps if I re-read I'll see that he had to move on and had little to no choice.

We find ourselves bending toward pragmatic considerations, even believing things that help us to survive. The winds and the waves are very strong. But is there anything that we hold onto with persistent, sometimes unrewarded, even sometimes bitter effort? That would be one of our "conservatisms".

A man and woman might make each other their conservatisms, no matter what changed around them, their relationship a good thing they hold onto out of the past. They might have children and hold onto them (those links to the future) as conservatisms. The family might hold onto their allegiance to God all together, as things change. There could be other conservatisms than those -- vocations, hobbies, perspectives on the world, remembering past experiences or past relationships.

The energy for progressivism comes out of the far-reaching outworking of some conservatism. A conservatism plays itself out in how we live our lives and what our lives are, in the long term. You can sometimes see someone's conservatism written into their face.

Sometimes we are able to ask ourselves "Should we continue in this particular conservatism?" and choose one way or the other to keep it or let it go.

Labels: #culture, #definition, #history, #holiness, #hope, #patience, #relationships, #seriousness, #suffering God

Death in the City

%death-in-city

Tuesday, September 3, 2019

(a book review)

One thing that Simone Weil, Ramon Llull, and Francis Schaeffer all have in common is an emphasis on holiness, more genuine Christianity, and also, that they're obsolete. I think obsolescence and holiness are inherently related, because to be holy is to be set apart, somewhat set apart from history. The Old Testament is a work of holiness and conservatism.

It feels kind of strange, kind of deliberate, to be reading and promoting people I feel in my flesh to be obsolete, but when I actually read them (at least, Weil, and more so, Schaeffer), I can feel myself connecting with what they talk about as though it's current. Quickly after putting the book down, I find myself back in 2019, but life was more true when I was in the book.

Holiness movements don't have to be obsolete. John Wesley had a successful one, which led to the Methodist church. The effective altruists are rather like an atheistic, humanistic holiness movement. (The effective altruists love (no, "do good to") those who are distant as well as those who are close, and they set themselves apart from climate change to focus on more neglected existential risks. If the ethos of humanism is "humans save humanity by their efforts", then they live that out in a genuine and distinctive way.) Schaeffer had some limited success with his L'Abri center, and had some effect on the political sphere. Non-Christians tend to think of him now as an architect of the Christian Right, if at all. But Schaeffer was not as fortunate as Wesley or the EAs in riding the vital wave of his culture. Wesley was a progressive. There was a time when orthodox Christian beliefs could be progressive, instead of having to split off really Christian thinking from really progressive thinking. Schaeffer seems to be trying to hold together truly Christian thinking -- attempting to stay true to Christ as revealed in the Bible, independent of human pragmatism -- with the spirit of progressive culture, the spirit of caring about people and the world. He didn't want the church to be intellectually split off from the world, but rather to be able to speak in every area, as God had spoken in every area already. But he was conservative in outlook at the same time, seemed to see himself as fighting a losing battle that had to be fought.

I read Francis Schaeffer mostly when I was in college, and there was something in the reading that said: "there's a way to reform human culture to become actually good, and the way to that is through Christianity." It

was an exciting thought. I turned away from him after a while, but recently read a work I had missed, *Death in the City*. Here are some ideas in it:

People are taken more seriously when they are seen as capable of doing real wrong. (People are more significant.) Compassionate Christianity sees people as real and in need of salvation. Doctrine without compassion and reliance on God in daily life is dead, fake, ineffective. Through ongoing relationship with Jesus, over time we are "impregnated" to bring fruit into the world. Reformation (return to source doctrine) and revival (new work of the Spirit, new turning of hearts) go together.

If you know that God exists and has absolute standards, you care more. The stakes of life are higher, and you have to depend on him for salvation, because the standard matters and you can't make it without him. If there are real standards, then people can really be lost, and you can really care about their well-being. Being really Christian (really taking people seriously) causes people to love more genuinely and with more passion and holds society to a higher standard. A coach can get you to try harder than you would yourself. You'll set a goal to try 20% harder and only go 15% harder, but the coach will get you to try 50% harder because she knows you better than you know yourself, and after several failed attempts, you'll make it. A God outside of human pragmatism, or a standard not up for negotiation, can be that for people. To me, this sounds progressive, and in my younger days, more in the phase of life of seeking progressiveness, I saw Christianity as more progressive than secular thinking.

(A few weeks after first drafting this, I am struck by another point from *Death in the City*, which is that Schaeffer wanted people to have a personal relationship with God, which in some ways is like having a personal relationship with the standard. Personally-relating is the way to live all of life, including the life of bringing things up to standards. Schaeffer would say "personally-relating because of the 'God who is there'", I think, and a God who is present in your life protects you from the natural tendency toward "I'm a survivor, will think whatever I need to to survive, will write off whoever I need to to survive, will cease personally-relating mode of life, will reduce all things opposed to my survival as means to my ends.")

But even in college, I was able to tell that Schaeffer was writing to a much different world than mine. I think our world has a certain innocence to it, believe it or not, an innocence with respect to sin if not to anything else. I hardly have an inherent sense of sin. I know that many Christians still do, but my "flesh" is more secular, even if my will (perhaps my true heart), tries and tries to be Christian. But I can still see some of Schaeffer's vision, the vision that might never be, because we'll never go back to the old days of believing in real sin, real guilt, as opposed to guilty feelings or thoughts, back to real standards.

It's strange. If you look close up, people do seem to care as much as they ever did. And yet, I don't see very many people caring as much as Schaeffer did. If you don't like conservative Christians, you should read Schaeffer just to see a "steel man" of their position, perhaps in his ideas, but more essentially in the kind of voice he had. I don't know too much about his life, so I won't comment on that, but a writing style isn't nothing as far as indicating what kind of person someone is.

Overall, our culture feels bustling, alive, active -- on one level. And played out, over, feeble -- on another. In the political sphere, there is militancy (godless mob absolutes), but not real love, and no guilt, no absolutes that can implicate both the executor of mob justice and its victim into a brotherhood. Opposed to that is an enfeebling blunting of absolutes, a distrust of our moral motions. (Maybe I'm caricaturing the left and liberals, respectively.) The biblical position is that we are all under God -- Schaeffer would say, "under God's wrath", but that doesn't work nowadays, but still, under God.

People nowadays who care as much as Schaeffer did tend not to be Christians (that I know of -- I think if there was someone like Schaeffer nowadays among Christians I would know about it, but maybe not). These more secular caring people seem to be putting out fires rather than thinking of the long term. It's natural during traumatic times to focus on the immediate threat and then its recurring aftershocks. Culture is something way behind the problems we have now. We want to deal with climate change now, but wouldn't it have been much better if we could have gone back to the early 20th century when we first knew the threat and adjust civilization back then? But then maybe there were many cultural reasons why we wouldn't have done that then. So then to go back to the early 19th century and deal with those 20th century cultural reasons upstream? If we could reform the culture, then we would have a base to respond to geographically distant problems (distant people), or looming threats, as one people. Most of our existential risks come from human activities. If we had a really good culture, we wouldn't have anything to fear as a species, except from the natural world.

I realize that at this point, it may be like saying to the captain of the *Titanic* as it goes down "You know, if you had chosen a different route a week ago, none of this would be happening." Could any of this cultural change have possibly worked in the past? Or is human nature too hard to change? Was Christianity tried and found wanting, as some would allege? Or was it not even tried, as both Gandhi and Chesterton alleged? Schaeffer quotes the book of Jeremiah in *Death in the City*, and Jeremiah is an interesting book because it starts off with one of my favorite writing quotes (1:9-10):

> Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And

> the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

It seems like Jeremiah is going to be a powerful person. But nobody likes what he has to say and he gets thrown in a pit. The king burns his prophecy rather than heeding it. It looks like Jeremiah's just telling the truth, to no further purpose. Maybe his words brought on the judgment they foretold (in some way helped God bring the judgment), and maybe future people have been inspired by Jeremiah to "build and to plant" from his words. But Jeremiah's reality for many years would have been one of "I am saying what I'm supposed to say but there's no apparent power in my words."

Maybe you just have to say the truth as the ship goes down -- the truth is a good in itself. But maybe there will be the future generations who can pick up the message and apply it, and so vindicate God and Jeremiah. We live in an analogous time with climate change. We don't know how bad it will be. Our best messages probably won't turn the ship around. Perhaps only a remnant will survive, who will then have to put together a new world. What will they remember? The Israelites kept Jeremiah in mind, for generations down to this day. What is worth remembering?

One reply to Schaeffer would be: "What you're saying isn't true. You don't know that God exists." Schaeffer engaged with the people of his time and obviously was able to remain a Christian throughout (although I remember he had a period of doubt sometime during his adult life which led to him understanding Christianity better). But it's a fair point, and one which many people have tried to answer without enough success to create an actually good public religion. But another reply is "Even if what you're saying might be true, we don't want to hear it. Liberal humanism is good enough for us. It's too risky to listen to what you have to say. We like vagueness. Vagueness is peace. Absolutes lead to fanaticism and psychological distress, so don't even try to have a better approach to absolutes. Having one God is bad, too coercive. Liberal morality is a better thing to have be coercive. And isn't life beautiful? There isn't enough time to be ugly to each other. People are good and should not be made to feel bad. Let's all be one as we wait for the end."

Maybe we are on the *Titanic* going down, the embodiers of a dying culture. But I want to bear witness to the possibility that if we could just believe in God, a God who cares more than Schaeffer did and asks more of us than we ask of ourselves, we could have an actually good society, and that this possibility is a good thing, and we can recognize that even if we don't think it can be realized. In other words, to become agnostics who are no longer comfortable in our agnosticism, or even atheists who regret that the

best of the "widely-believed fairy tales" can never be true. If they were true, all the causes humanism concerns itself with could be addressed, with no more miracle needed than the change in heart and outlook of those responsible for human society -- all of us. All this to say that a proof of the existence of the right kind of God should be a welcome thing to a humanist.

Some cultural changes seem impossible. We can't even imagine them. To imagine them would be a cultural change. And yet cultural changes occur. More so than Schaeffer did, Llull and Weil both tried to imagine ideal societies. I can't imagine any of their obsolete visions coming true. But I am part of this culture. I realize now that I'm more likely to believe a professor's tired, off-hand comment than a homeless person's passionate, well-thought-out theories. When I was younger, I tended more to the reverse. Our civilization is old, but after it dies, there may be a younger one to replace it.

Labels: #agnosticism, #book review, #Christianity, #culture, #Francis Schaeffer, #God, #history, #holiness, #hope, #humanism, #leftism, #liberalism, #longer, #love, #morality, #politics, #Ramon Llull, #Simone Weil

"Make God your God"

%make-god-your-god

Tuesday, September 3, 2019

"Make God your God", says the Bible. "Love God with all of your being", says Jesus, "and love your neighbor as yourself". God comes first, before humans.

But what does God want? God is love, is the God of love. So can't we just reduce "love God with all of your being" to "love humanity"?

If you make God your God, you trust him and obey him as well as work for his interests. If you make "the love of humanity" your God, you don't trust the same way, or obey the same way. You run on different fuel and listen with different ears.

Labels: #God, #humanism, #Jesus, #love, #note, #relationships, #trust

Law

%law

Monday, September 9, 2019

Law is what you have to do to survive. Knowing the facts can be Law, doing the right thing can be Law, being cynical can be Law.

Once we understand Law, understand what is needed to survive, we feel like we have the right to enforce Law, to push it on other people and fit ourselves into it. We can lean hard on it.

Labels: #definition, #formulas, #psychology

Anti-skills

%anti-skills

Monday, September 9, 2019

Skills and anti-skills are both learned. A skill is something that helps you to enact your will in the world. Magic, technology, taking charge. An anti-skill is a lesson learned which is about something outside of you taking charge of your life, or is you not enacting your will. Prayer, waiting, making space, can all be skills that aspire to be anti-skills. But true anti-skills are not part of the order of Law, doing what you have to to survive. They happen to you apart from instrumental or even, sometimes, epistemic rationality, are orthogonal to human goals, even, sometimes, human perspectives. Coming to see things properly is less often a skill, is more often an anti-skill. When you see things properly, you are not more powerful than reality. *It* is affecting *you*.

We like to be born with the right anti-skills, because acquiring them is often beyond our ability, no matter how hard we try. Some anti-skills may never be learned through our own strivings.

Skills and anti-skills work together, and both are components of wisdom, spiritual and practical maturity.

Labels: #definition, #formulalessness, #formulas, #maturity, #psychology, #rationality

Lift Up Your Head

%lift-up-your-head

Monday, September 9, 2019

Sometimes it's a relief to see that you're part of a bigger battle. The enemy soldier close at hand can fill your gaze, can make you feel like there's nothing but you and them, all risk to you and nothing else to fight for.

Sometimes literally lifting up your head takes you out of the mindset of narrowmindedness.

Labels: #courage, #hope, #note, #psychology

Real Self

%real-self

Wednesday, September 11, 2019

What is the real self? Is it the self that we choose? We choose images.

If you would prefer to be someone, you might try to be that person, and project that image. But you may not be able to be that person. You can't live in this world as that image. So then you just are yourself -- but are you really yourself? Or is the real you the one that you would choose if there were no other constraints, the ideal image?

Max Stirner made the point that you don't know what a slave wants until they get freedom.

Labels: #idealization, #note, #personal

Realistic Sword-fighting

%realistic-sword-fighting

Wednesday, September 11, 2019

Sometimes as part of a drama on a stage, you want there to be sword-fighting. A more realistic drama (a drama with more reality), requires a metal sword. You can blunt the edge to some extent, but you can still do a lot of damage with it. Or you can use a wooden or plastic sword, if it's not as important to be realistic.

Labels: #note, #parable, #personal, #relationships

Shared Vision

%shared-vision

Wednesday, September 11, 2019

We have a tendency to think that things that all of us can see are more real than things that only one person can see. This protects us from wild ideas and claims about reality, and also from the insights of sensitive people.

Labels: #courage, #culture, #epistemology, #listening, #note, #ontology, #personal, #power, #suffering God

Glory

%glory

Friday, September 13, 2019

People want to be considered trustworthy by other people. They have a point of view on reality, on well-being, and want the other person to both have their values and also trust in their path toward realizing those values.

We point toward things that are trustworthy, make a public noise about it. We say "This movie is deep", will stir deep things. Depth is good. This movie is effective in bringing it to us. It is trustworthy. We are impressed and wish to make others be impressed in the same way that we are.

This rendering of "this is trustworthy" toward something, about something, can be called "glory".

Labels: #definition, #glory, #idealization, #psychology, #trust

Atheistic gods

%atheistic-gods

Friday, September 13, 2019

When we do not believe in God, do not trust God, who is going to save the world? We have to. We have to be God. We have to be good, we have to be effective. We have to be responsible. We have to know best what to do.

This sounds good.

Except that when we do not believe in God, do not trust God, we set up ourselves as gods. We take responsibility for other people's lives, we take over their lives. We interfere with other people's development. We see things from *our* point of view -- who could be wiser than us? We attack other people's developing points of view and self-trust, attack their trust in God. We insert ourselves in people's lives, as though we want them to worship us, for them to give us glory, so that we can be acknowledged as trustworthy. We want other people to see the error of their ways. We think we have facts, we act like we know things beyond any doubt -- unless someone else can make themselves god over us, beat us down and dethrone us. We do not choose to give glory to the God who doesn't tend to beat us down and dethrone us, the true God.

Labels: #altruism, #faith, #humanism, #note, #politics, #power, #rationality, #relationships, #trust

Precipitation

%precipitation

Friday, September 13, 2019

The silver cation is a unique ion, different from all other silver ions. It slides chaotically in the water, electrostatically unfulfilled. It entered the solution with a nitrate anion, which is similarly lost.

But after a time, the silver cation found a bromide anion, which resolved its tension. They fall out of solution.

Things are ideal: There is a silver cation for every bromide anion. Things work out for all the silver ions and all the bromide ions: there are none left in solution.

Labels: #culture, #love, #note, #parable, #personal, #relationships, #social connection, #victory

"Flesh", "Spirit"

%flesh-spirit

Tuesday, October 8, 2019

Sometimes I think of people as "flesh" and "spirit". The "flesh" is like muscles, is strong and thick. The vivid and obvious parts of human psychology are "fleshly". Also there is "spirit". The "spirit" is lightweight and thus can connect with the quiet, subtle, gentle world. The spirit can be easily blown about, can see all sorts of different angles. The spirit is under a person's control, it is free but weak. But the flesh has inertia out of its very strength.

The spirit can truly intend what the flesh can't bring out in the visible world. We tend to judge each other by what we bring out in the visible world. We even judge ourselves so.

Labels: #definition, #psychology

Testing

%testing

Tuesday, October 8, 2019

Sometimes when you're younger, you have not been tested. You don't trust yourself, because you haven't been pushed and pulled. You haven't seen the terror of death and survived. You haven't seen yourself in the midst of temptation -- you doubt that you could walk through the room without slipping the gems in your pocket.

Then you are tested. You are hacked at by temptations, fears, the desire to die, opposition from other people, or whatever else, and your flesh is broken and reformed. Until then, you live in tension, closing yourself up and craving to be changed. Some of what you think are your desires for other things or other people are really just that craving to be changed.

Having been tested, you might think that you have arrived. Or you might think that the process of being tested itself is something to arrive at, something to think of as "the answer" for the rest of your life.

Labels: #maturity, #note, #patience, #personal, #trust

Horizons

%horizons

Saturday, November 2, 2019

I was talking to someone once about life choices. Should he marry a particular woman? He said she would affect his horizons. He could still be a Christian but he couldn't become a preacher.

Becoming a preacher was far off, not something his self at the time was too visibly interested in doing. But horizons limit the person you might become as well as the person you are.

Labels: #definition, #life choices, #personal, #relationships

Knowing Others Better

%knowing-others-better

Saturday, November 2, 2019

It's dangerous to think that you know someone better than they know themselves.

First, it's dangerous if you're wrong. You may see certain aspects of a person clearly, but it's unlikely that you have all the data. So you can possess a distorted view of someone which is very compelling to you. Then, you reflect that view back to them, directly or indirectly.

But also, it's dangerous if you're right. You have a lot of power if you understand someone better than they understand themselves. You'll know better how to defeat them in arguments. You'll approach them with a settled confidence about who they are which they can't contradict -- after all, you're the one with a better command of the facts of who they are. You set yourself up as the trustworthy, wise one, and the wise are those whose decision-making has legitimacy, and thus social power.

When in possession of this power, you can put the other person in a dependent state, setting their horizons within the bounds of your vision. This can prevent them from being the person that God wants them to be.

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Which is better, to know someone accurately, or to share the same reality as them? People who share the same reality can be friends. So you make the choice (or life makes it for you): to see things your way (to see the facts) or to share a journey with someone else.

If you know someone better than they do, you don't need to listen to them anymore. Speech is how we create reality, how we express ourselves.

Labels: #empathy, #life lessons, #listening, #maturity, #personal, #power, #relationships, #respect, #trust, #wisdom

While He is Near

%while-he-is-near

Monday, November 4, 2019

"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near."

If you want to develop a discipline, get up at 5 AM every morning and do it.

If you want to develop a habit, taste, or delight, catch yourself at a receptive moment and reward it.

If you want to meet a friend in person, you have to do it when they're in town.

You listen to a friend out of discipline and delight, but it is better when there is delight.

You speak to your friend when you do, and say what you say -- that is how he comes to know you. You are not in control of your relationship with God.

Labels: #Christianity, #God, #intuition, #listening, #note, #personal, #psychology, #relationships, #seeking

Flavors

%flavors

Saturday, November 23, 2019

Some old notes on "flavors":

Ethical Flavors

An ethical dilemma: do the right thing now vs. trust the less immediate thing which is better in the long run. Probably everyone leans on both the former and the latter, in other words, balancing deontology (the former) and consequentialism (the latter).

But which right things do we do now? Which less immediate things which are better in the long run?

Ethics has a structure (virtue, deontology, consequentialism) and a flavor. (Virtue ethics: Be the kind of person who does (which?) right thing now and trusts the (which?) less immediate thing which is better in the long run.)

With belief in God, your heart needs to be right, and you believe, trust, know that everything will be right in the long run, every dark part of a person will be exposed to truth, the timeline is long enough to do the right thing in the long run.

Without belief in God, you do what feels moral now, or not, and you don't expect justice or truth to win, you might not have a firm belief in or even a concept of justice or truth, everything is uncertain, you need to make tradeoffs, your heart doesn't need to be right if you get results, the timeline is uncertain and may not be long enough to do the right thing in the long run.

That's more virtue-ethical (in that the flavor of trust or non-trust in God affects the kind of person you are in approaching deontology or consequentialism).

A question you could ask: "What would be a really theistic thing to do right now? Or to trust in the long run?"

Without belief in God, it doesn't make as much sense to go against societal norms. Maybe the norm just is moral.

Holiness (being set apart, especially for, or to God) is an ethical flavor. Trust is an ethical flavor.

Social relativism (it's important to index yourself to your society) is a set of

ethical flavors (one for each society). "Human well-being" (the concept) is decided on by humans. Related: human relativism (it's important to index yourself to what humans want).

Flavors in Capitalism and Democracy

Liberalism's two children (capitalism and democracy) both forms of "democracy", broadly/literally taken. Capitalism is about the will of the people: the consumers and those who lead the consumers. Same with democracy: the will of the voters and those who lead the voters.

Both capitalism and democracy are self-regulating competitive systems. We might want a cooperative self-regulating economy. Then we might also want a cooperative self-regulating political system. Society has a structure (or structures) and a flavor (or flavors), in parallel with ethical flavors, above.

Labels: #culture, #economics, #holiness, #morality, #note, #philosophy, #politics, #psychology

Fear of What?

%fear-of-what

Saturday, November 23, 2019

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (source).

Or is it "the fear of death is the beginning of knowledge"? A lot of our criteria for why we should consider real what we do consider real boil down to "if you don't abide by these criteria consistently, you will be at greatest risk of physical death in the long run."

Or is it "the fear of shame" or "the fear of a particular human's opinion, or group of humans' opinions"? As opposed to the fear of the LORD's opinion.

Is fearlessness the beginning of knowledge? Or the full growth of it? There is a certain kind of fearlessness which comes from not caring. Experience is most real when there is fear, for a certain meaning of "real". Wealth enables us to not live in reality.

Knowledge has different flavors, different tonalities and physical expressions, depending on whether it is begun by the fear of death, the fear of shame, the fear of people's opinions, or whatever else, or the fear of the LORD.

Labels: #culture, #death, #epistemology, #fear, #God, #note, #philosophy, #social connection, #wisdom

Mental Health

%mental-health

Tuesday, November 26, 2019

Everything we experience is spoken to us by God. God does not like all the things he has to say (reality is not the way he would most like it to be). But, like Job, we can see that God gives and takes away, gives blessings and takes them away, gives afflictions and takes them away. What Job really wanted and got in the end, apart from blessings and relief from affliction, was God himself.

God speaks to us our experience. So mental illness is an expression of dysfunction in an aspect of our relationship with God. Likewise the effort and process of rehabilitating mental health (or "habilitating" what was never there) is a process of restoring or discovering an aspect of good relationship with God.

A smooth and trusting experience of the moment, repeated over the long term, is the goal of much mental health-seeking. To an extent, this pursuit can be a school for learning to trust God. But there is more to God than just the provider of smooth and trusting experience, just as there is more to a mother than her milk.

Labels: #God, #mental health, #note, #personal, #relationships, #trust

Stamina

%stamina

Tuesday, November 26, 2019

One of the things they don't tell you is that while appearances do matter (affecting how you relate to yourself, how others relate to you), what also matters is strength, stamina, strength of mind as well as body. If you are a beautiful person, do you have the strength to deliver on your beauty? Or will your stamina give out? -- you'll snap at someone you were gentle toward.

So virtue involves the building-up of wealth, while somehow not compromising a spirit of poverty. This presents a puzzle for which there is at least one answer I can think of -- how can these two aims be reconciled?

Labels: #idealization, #mental strength, #note, #personal, #psychology

Father and Son

%father-and-son

Thursday, December 5, 2019

He grew up with no father, only the address of where his father lived, and he was always trying to find a father. He knew that it would be unreasonable to expect his father to care for him, since he had abandoned him at birth and moved very far away. But he always hoped to find a father, and then forgot that hope and found himself offering himself up as a son to father-figure after father-figure, abusive men and men with no use for him.

Finally, with his mind and body broken, he thought, "Maybe I should go see my birth father." So he got to the door and his birth father let him in and they talked. And he wanted to stay the night, but his father said, "I'm not your father, son. You have to go. God is your father."

Labels: #God, #hope, #idealization, #life lessons, #parable, #personal

Father and Daughter

%father-and-daughter

Thursday, December 5, 2019

She grew up in her father's house. Her father had a corporation and she went to parties. She was beautiful and desirable.

One day, she asked her father for her inheritance. He said, "OK, but you only get half of what you ordinarily would have." She thought, fair's fair.

She went out into the world and associated with all kinds of people. She gave parties and sent her family photos.

But at some point, she fell in with a band of Christians. Soon, she was baptized, and gave all her money away, following Jesus.

But that life didn't suit her. She started to think it was only a phase. "Maybe I could get a job in my father's corporation," she thought. So she put on a long-sleeved T-shirt to cover her cross tattoo and took the bus, another, another bus back to her father's door.

He answered the door and said, "I'm not your father. God's your father." And he shut the door in her face.

Labels: #Christianity, #God, #life choices, #life lessons, #parable, #personal

"How should I trust?"

%how-should-i-trust

Thursday, December 5, 2019

Pouring your heart out to God and asking what you need of him is good because it is a form of trust. But sometimes doing those things is not trusting, on a deeper level. You pour out your heart rather than listening, or you ask what you need or want instead of trusting that he will provide.

So you can ask, "God, how should I trust you in this situation?"

Labels: #God, #note, #trust

Substitutes for Desire

%substitutes-for-desire

Thursday, December 5, 2019

You can work toward something as a substitute for desiring it. For instance, I think it would be easier for me to write a love poem or even to win someone's heart than to desire them romantically. I could do those things as substitutes for romantic love, and they might be perceived as romantic love, and do some of the work of romantic love, but I would have no such love.

So it can be with holiness. We work toward holiness; worry that we aren't working toward it (a substitute for working toward it); worry that by working toward it, we're bad people for being so ambitious (another substitute); worry that we'll never really be holy (yet another); labor in our minds over it -- but what we could be doing instead is desiring it.

Labels: #desire, #holiness, #note, #seeking

Bible Readings (introduction)

%bible-readings-introduction

Wednesday, May 27, 2020

Today I start posting "bible readings". All the Bible passages come from the World English Bible.

Do people have time to think? Maybe some do. These readings tend to be short but you can get more out of them if you think about them.

Labels: #bible reading

Transfiguration

%transfiguration

Wednesday, May 27, 2020

Matthew 17:

> 1 After six days, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John
> his brother, and brought them up into a high mountain by
> themselves. 2 He was changed (transfigured) before them. His
> face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as
> the light. 3 Behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them
> talking with him.
>
> 4 Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to
> be here. If you want, let's make three tents here: one for you,
> one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
>
> 5 While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud
> overshadowed them. Behold, a voice came out of the cloud,
> saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.
> Listen to him."
>
> 6 When the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces, and
> were very afraid. 7 Jesus came and touched them and said,
> "Get up, and don't be afraid." 8 Lifting up their eyes, they saw
> no one, except Jesus alone.
>
> 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus
> commanded them, saying, "Don't tell anyone what you saw,
> until the Son of Man has risen from the dead."

Obviously what happened here was an event of power. The disciples already knew that Jesus was a man of power -- they might have felt, if not consciously thought, that he was a god. In this event, he is revealed as God, but perhaps more importantly, as a true servant of God. God validates his son.

To those who see through the eyes of power, the Transfiguration separates disciples from Jesus. The disciples will never have Jesus' power. They are subject to the absolute power of his glory. But if you see how the point of the Transfiguration is for God to validate his son, then you see how the

disciples are kin to Jesus. If they obeyed God as sons, as Jesus did, God could say of each of them "Behold my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

Labels: #bible reading, #fear, #glory, #God, #idealization, #Jesus, #kinship, #love, #power

Spiritual Reality

%spiritual-reality

Wednesday, June 3, 2020

EDIT: wording change. Also, this post may imply that Buddhism does not connect with reality as much as (a certain kind of) Christian theism does. I am not sure this means that Buddhists or Christians are in practice any more or less connected with reality than each other. In other words, people don't always live according to their own ideologies. My opinion, as someone who knows something, but not a lot, about Buddhism, is that the ideology of it lends itself to a kind of anti-realism, which might not be what follows from a certain kind of Christian ideology.

Romans 8:

> 1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the law couldn't do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace; 7 because the mind of the flesh is hostile toward God, for it is not subject to God's law, neither indeed can it be. 8 Those who are in the flesh can't please God.

Thinking like a preacher, I see "You choose which law to live by. You'll always live by a law. The law of fleshly desires, which wants a pound of flesh from everyone who has hurt you, which wants you to be responsible for yourself because there is no God, which demands responsibility of and from others (among other things that we naturally want) -- or the law of the Spirit, which trusts in God, which listens, which does not believe in a strict accounting, at least not one up to humans to understand. To see things as though there is no God is to rebel against God, against the law of the Spirit. It is to reject God."

Thinking like a philosopher, I see a kind of approach to reality here. We

think things have natures. Some people don't like that. They say that things have no natures. Nature: A thing has its attributes, its way it is. Anti-nature: Or it doesn't -- we can throw away the strict accounting -- anything goes (at least on some level).

We are tempted to see reality as impersonal. The modernists (nature and nothing but nature) and the postmodernists (anti-nature mixed with nature) both think reality is impersonal. But what if reality is personal? What would that look like? Things might still have natures, but be more like words, spoken with the breath of a person. Or there might be a reality other than nature.

Buddhism may be attractive to some as a way to soften the word "is", which can soften anxiety. "Non-dual" could be a way to soften "is". DBT treats borderline people who have black and white thinking by borrowing from Buddhism's softer "is".

We might see a softening of "is" in "seeing things in a Spiritual way rather than natural way". Things really are a certain way. But the way in which they are is partially unknown to us, is known by God instead. And in order to know something, it's known against the backdrop of our relationships with God. For something to be, it must be by the will of God, according to the legitimacy of God. So for something to really *be* itself requires that God exist -- and, according to a different logic, it follows that we trust him. And so "is" remains as true and even clear as ever, but a bigger fact -- not really a fact, but a person -- sets it in a different context, allowing us to bear it.

We get wrapped up in our interpretations of what we see. But God has an interpretation of things, which we can hear from him, and by aligning ourselves with him. The Spirit is life and peace.

If reality is fundamentally personal (which is pointed to by Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*), then we *relate* to reality, instead of figuring it out, controlling it, possessing it, taking it for granted, denying it, or ignoring it. But the greater personal reality is God, and it's in the context of trust and loyalty toward him that we can rightly approach what is, and thus come to know the truth.

Labels: #bible reading, #Christianity, #desire, #epistemology, #formulalessness, #God, #listening, #ontology, #philosophy, #relationships, #trust

Prophets Make You Trust

%prophets-make-you-trust

Friday, June 5, 2020

1 Kings 17:

> 1 Elijah the Tishbite, who was one of the settlers of Gilead,
> said to Ahab, "As Yahweh, the God of Israel, lives, before
> whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but
> according to my word." 2 Then Yahweh's word came to him,
> saying, 3 "Go away from here, turn eastward, and hide
> yourself by the brook Cherith, that is before the Jordan. 4 You
> shall drink from the brook. I have commanded the ravens to
> feed you there." 5 So he went and did according to Yahweh's
> word, for he went and lived by the brook Cherith that is
> before the Jordan. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat
> in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he
> drank from the brook. 7 After a while, the brook dried up,
> because there was no rain in the land.
>
> 8 Yahweh’s word came to him, saying, 9 "Arise, go to
> Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there. Behold, I
> have commanded a widow there to sustain you."
>
> 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath; and when he came to
> the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering
> sticks. He called to her and said, "Please get me a little water
> in a jar, that I may drink."
>
> 11 As she was going to get it, he called to her and said,
> "Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."
>
> 12 She said, "As Yahweh your God lives, I don't have anything
> baked, but only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a
> jar. Behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and
> bake it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die."
>
> 13 Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go and do as you have
> said; but make me a little cake from it first, and bring it out to
> me, and afterward make some for you and for your son. 14
> For Yahweh, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of meal will not

run out, and the jar of oil will not fail, until the day that Yahweh sends rain on the earth.'"

15 She went and did according to the saying of Elijah; and she, he, and her household ate many days. 16 The jar of meal didn't run out and the jar of oil didn't fail, according to Yahweh's word, which he spoke by Elijah.

And here, in 1 Kings 18:

1 After many days, Yahweh's word came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab; and I will send rain on the earth."

2 Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. The famine was severe in Samaria. 3 Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared Yahweh greatly; 4 for when Jezebel cut off Yahweh's prophets, Obadiah took one hundred prophets, and hid them fifty to a cave, and fed them with bread and water.) 5 Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land, to all the springs of water, and to all the brooks. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, that we not lose all the animals." 6 So they divided the land between them to pass throughout it. Ahab went one way by himself, and Obadiah went another way by himself. 7 As Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. He recognized him, and fell on his face, and said, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?"

8 He answered him, "It is I. Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here!'"

9 He said, "How have I sinned, that you would deliver your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me? 10 As Yahweh your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you. When they said, 'He is not here,' he took an oath of the kingdom and nation that they didn't find you. 11 Now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here."' 12 It will happen, as soon as I leave you, that Yahweh's Spirit will carry you I don't know where; and so when I come and tell Ahab, and he can't find you, he will kill me. But I, your servant, have feared Yahweh from my youth. 13 Wasn't it told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed Yahweh's prophets, how I hid one hundred men of Yahweh's prophets with fifty to

a cave, and fed them with bread and water? 14 Now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here".' He will kill me."

15 Elijah said, "As Yahweh of Armies lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today." 16 So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah.

When you follow the Spirit, you will be led into other people's lives. They have the choice of whether to trust you or not. There is some risk -- in the case of the widow of Zarephath and Obadiah, the risk of death. You sometimes bring with you a confrontation with life and death, just in the course of following God.

Labels: #bible reading, #courage, #death, #faith, #fear, #listening, #trust

Aesthetic Bullying

%aesthetic-bullying

Sunday, June 7, 2020

Aesthetic bullying is when you say "Poison is the greatest metal band of all time. Anyone who doesn't agree just doesn't know what they're talking about." "Aesthetic bullying" and that particular example are relatively nice versions of a phenomenon that can affect any kind of values. You offer no argument for your opinion, you just forcefully state it in an intimidating way. It is taken to be, and sometimes is, an effective way of getting people to agree with you, but it has no connection to ultimate validity, just your projection of psychological force.

Labels: #communication, #culture, #definition, #morality, #power, #psychology

Simantism

%simantism

Sunday, June 7, 2020

See also Parts of a Simantic Word and Simantism, Part 2

Edited for tone and correctness.

What if there was a philosophy that was the opposite of nihilism? Nihilism denies meaning. So what would we call its opposite? The Greek for "meaning" is "semantos". That's ancient Greek. But in modern Greek it's "simantos" -- modern Greek for meaning as it's experienced everyday nowadays. So, it could be called "simantism".

Everything has meaning. When you look at something, you see its meaning, the way that it registers in you. In *The Little Mermaid* movie, the mermaid sees a fork as a comb (which she calls a "dinglehopper"). When she looks at it, it means that to her, but it means "fork" to us. Physically, it's the same. But the world isn't fundamentally physical. A thing is a thing according to its meaning.

How can a thing mean what it does? *It* does, we do not perceive that we project meaning on to it. What we actually experience is not that we project. We don't think we project the physical world. If we assume that the physical world is ultimate reality, we have to assume that the meaning of a thing can't be stored in the matter of a thing, and so must be a projection. But what we really experience is that a beautiful thing is beautiful, and a sunset is a sunset, not billions of unrelated dust and water particles lit up by light, which we "make" into a sunset. A sunset is a real thing independent of us. You do not make a sunset, you see it. You don't make it beautiful, it is beautiful.

So then, materialism goes against empiricism. When we deny our experiences, life becomes less meaningful. We become dishonest on a certain level.

What we see to be beautiful *deserves* to be beautiful. So there is an element of legitimacy in meaning. Human well-being is deeply meaningful to people because it deserves to be meaningful. If we think "I'm projecting deservingness onto this", it weakens the meaning of it.

But sometimes interpretations betray us. So we learn to not trust our perceptions. Does this mean that we do not really perceive what we perceive? No, we really perceive the sunset to be a sunset and a beautiful sunset. We really perceive wrong as wrong and right as right. We really

perceive people as this way or that way. The perceptions may turn out to betray, but they really are what they are.

When we misinterpret a person, we really are relating to some kind of reality. It isn't them, but we really are perceiving something. This something has meaning to us. Illusions and lies have meaning to us. Doubts do. They all really do. We really do perceive.

So how can we explain meaningful perception? There are beings (objects, people, phenomena, ideas, etc.) which are not us. We directly perceive these things. And yet these beings which we could never conjure on our own in some way are what they are in a way that follows from who we are. The sunset is beautiful, has an intuitive meaning, to me because of who I am as well as because of how it is. So these things, which I do not make, which do not follow from my will, which sometimes surprise me, sometimes surprising me in how they are meaningful, somehow "know" me in order to speak to me the way that they do, be the way that they are.

Is there anything other than consciousness? If so, then how would that non-consciousness interact with consciousness? I'm not sure that it's possible for something that is essentially not conscious to "bring about" or interact with consciousness. But it makes perfect sense to say that consciousness perceives appearances of non-consciousness (for instance, perceives matter), and that consciousnesses can interact with consciousnesses.

On the other hand, if we look at what is the most fundamental reality, we arrive at "*I* think, therefore *I* am." It could be that only I exist. If so, then what do I think about myself? If I am the base unit of reality, then why should I question my sense that I am a full-fledged person, rather than some stringing-together of matter or impersonal consciousness? The person becomes the fundamental unit of reality.

But if only I exist, how do I explain all the things that are not-me that I interact with? And how is it that these things that are not-me somehow "know" how to be connected to who I am in their very being? Are they each conscious beings who know me?

Perhaps. If so, then what about the way in which everything that exists (as a whole) can speak to me, can mean a certain way to me? Does that mean that everything that exists is a conscious being who knows me? It could be that I have my own individuality and yet am part of another being. If we look at things from the "everything is consciousness" lens, a consciousness (a "coordinating consciousness") could connect with another consciousness by sharing that other being's exact consciousness. If I feel pain, this coordinating consciousness could feel the exact experience I do, not a copy. And this coordinating consciousness could connect to all other conscious beings, and communicate their intentions into my consciousness.

It might be like how a live TV director can see a bank of different potential camera angles on different screens all at once. This could bind things together using pure consciousness.

So, the being that is conscious of everything could be everything that is -- a person who is distinct from all the things that it is and yet contains everything / everyone. This being is fully empathic -- goes beyond empathy as humans know it, by perfectly experiencing what we experience exactly as we do. Through that experience, it is able to communicate things to us exactly as we would perceive them. Its motive would be to eventually eliminate the betrayals we experience, because a betrayal of us is a betrayal of it, as well as bringing us into tune with itself so as to eliminate the ways we betray it. It puts up with our suffering, and our betrayals of it, without deciding to make us not be one of the things that are -- why? It must value us on some level.

Basically, this being sounds like God.

What about legitimacy? Is it possible for things to really be as we interpret them? Can something really be wrong? We might be wrong about it being wrong, maybe it's right, but is there any possibility of us being right about it? If we internalize on some level that no one really knows what's right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, we don't trust our plain, honest perceptions of things. And, supposing that there is a real right and wrong, if we think it's just "my take on things" that something is wrong, we don't do what's really right or avoid what's really wrong, because we can't fully trust our own values.

The problem comes because people's values differ. People's opinions differ. So is there an opinion that can decide between different values, opinions, cultures? What is it that would make an opinion most valid? Is it that the opinion-haver is powerful? Or rather that they are in touch with reality? Or they are reality? We tend to find valid the opinions of people we respect. Who is the most-respectworthy, most-valid person? What would they look like?

If a leader imposes a situation on you, shouldn't they also experience what you do as much as you have to? Isn't being all about experiencing, about trust? So then to really be, you have to be disposed to trust, to connect to and accept as beneficial on some level even the worst things. God experiences all the bad things we do (and the good), so then what is left to validate his legitimacy but for him to experience life (and death) as a limited being? So there must be some way in which the author of legitimacy can be a limited being. This would make sense if reality, the language of reality, of how things mean to personal beings (a sunset is a simantic word that many people can share, but which means something a little different to each person), and thus the language of what is and what is legitimate, was first coined and developed by two or more beings in

collaboration, one of whom was all-things, conscious, some of whom were limited but of the same kinship group.

If God exists and is the foundation of legitimacy, then if we align our thinking with God's existence and values, then we can minimize how much we interpret things a certain way and then turn out to be wrong. We can find meaningful the things that God finds meaningful to a greater degree than if we based them on "what I feel, or what everybody sort of feels" -- we might say "I like loving people", but if we acknowledge the reality of God, then we have to *really* love people, even more than we would like. And we would have to approach love itself from the angle that God really exists (viewed Spiritually), and not make love (or some version of it) a pitiless, brutal god of its own, an impersonal idol.

If a society acknowledges God, then it can really be good. And it can take into account working according to God's interests, not just its own. Humans have something outside themselves to look to, so that humanity itself does not become a collective (semi-personal) idol.

People get focused on their own pain, their own ability to trust. But there is a reality outside of well-being and the obsession with well-being -- the world of meaning, of things that exist just in themselves, apart from anyone's interests. On a certain level, this is what we want when we seek after truth.

So this is a sketch of a philosophy which supports or even maximizes meaning, to provide an opposite to nihilism.

Labels: #empathy, #God, #longer, #meaning, #metaphysics, #morality, #ontology, #philosophy

Meaning Conveyed Through

%meaning-conveyed-through

Monday, June 8, 2020

Meaning is conveyed through aleatoric art.

Meaning is conveyed through what we can see of human beings and animals.

Meaning is conveyed through art.

Meaning is conveyed through betrayal.

Meaning is conveyed through blasphemies.

Meaning is conveyed through concepts.

Meaning is conveyed through doubts.

Meaning is conveyed through fragrances (even cheap ones).

Meaning is conveyed through interpretations.

Meaning can be conveyed through life as a whole.

Meaning is conveyed through life realities.

"That love story is just dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, evolutionary mechanism" itself conveys meaning.

Meaning is conveyed through moralities.

Meaning is conveyed through numbers.

Meaning is conveyed through objects.

Meaning is conveyed through pain.

Meaning is conveyed through patterns.

Meaning is conveyed through the sky (a firmament, a canopy, etc.)

Meaning is conveyed through stars, as pinpoints of light as much as fusion engines trillions of miles away.

Meaning is conveyed through sunsets. (Aggregates of water molecules struck by light? Rather, a vision in the sky.)

Meaning is conveyed through the moment.

Meaning is conveyed through words which turn people away from trusting

in meanings.

Labels: #meaning, #note, #philosophy, #psychology

Simantic Words

%simantic-words

Tuesday, June 16, 2020

Everything that exists is conscious, but perhaps some things are words spoken by persons, and in that sense extensions of the speaker, rather than completely independent persons. In this way, it is possible for a brick, concept, emotion, spoken or written word, or any other phenomenon to not have its own personality. Such a phenomenon is a simantic word. It has meaning, and the meaning is put into it by a speaker who speaks it to you, the listener. The speaker knows you and adjusts the meaning of the word so that it means what it means to you. (This paragraph might be clearer after reading Simantism.)

Added 18 November 2020:

> By "not have its own personality", I mean that it can be a thing without being a conscious thing. It can be part of the one who speaks it, that is how we ground their existence in the view that all that exists are persons, consciousnesses with preferences and wills. However, while a subject is not a simantic word, the true nature of a subject is. So in that sense, a person can be a simantic word.

Simantic words have a meaning independent of the hearer. They are coined. The Coiners of the universe (the whole of reality, wholeness and reality included), time, matter, the emotions, species of all sorts (biological or not), taxonomies and what instantiate them, and so on, determine much of what a word means. But we individually also understand words in our own way.

A word stands between speaker and listener and connects them. It means something different to both speaker and listener, but substantially the same to both. The consciousness that speaks to us, God, the Speaker, shares our experiences, shares the words we hear from him, although he understands more of what the words mean than we do. So we have direct knowledge of the meaning of our experiences, and we have a good idea of God's understanding of them, through our own understanding, although there is room for error depending on how much we are in tune with him.

As a consequence, those who practice all kinds of religion (or other meaningful pursuits) find themselves being spoken to by God. An entire religion is valid, even if not literally true, because it is a word spoken by God to its adherent. It is possible that a pursuit is not entirely in line with

God, but in general, what is beautiful is good, if not necessarily literally true. There are many images of God that we worship, some more, or less, connected with who he is, but only one God who answers our prayers.

Labels: #definition, #religion

Book Review: Dark Intimacy by David J. Hassel

%book-review-dark-intimacy-by-david-j

Sunday, June 21, 2020

The "dark" in the title has to do (as the subtitle says) with the difficulty of prayer experiences.

The book talks about "intimacy", which Hassel gives his own flavor to.

This book seems idiosyncratic, which makes me think it partially comes out of the author's own life. This is interesting in itself.

Here are some notes I took, related to the book:

> Intimacy in one area leads to intimacy in another.
>
> --
>
> I'm reading Hassel's *Dark Intimacy* right now. It has a good section on powerlessness. There's also a section on the "prayer of being". On pp. 95 - 96:
>
> > Let us glance at these levels of human experience so as to better understand dryness in prayer. There is, first, a superficial level which presents to our awareness pleasures and pains like the constant purr of an air-conditioner, the heavy perfume of lilacs, the irritation of a skin rash or a raspy voice, the comforting warmth of a May sun or an April shower. The first level, then, is a constant stream of sensate impressions, the context of life.
> >
> > Underneath this is a second layer of deeper experiences, such as the constant ache of neuralgia or the deep pleasure of loving intercourse or the delight of solving a perplexing business problem or the lyric leap of an evening at the symphony or the exuberant planning for the first baby or the panic fear of a flashing

> knife. This second level is more meaningful and lends greater depth to the first one.
>
> But underlying both of these is a still more profound set of experiences which make up the third level. It is at this level that one experiences the enervating worry at not having a job, the satisfaction of affectionate family living, the sorrow of watching the alcoholic spouse struggle for respectability, the fulfillment of a successfully completed project demanding ten years of one's life, the sense of wortwhileness in the costly sacrifice for the beloved. At this third level the deepest hopes are raised or dashed, the finest joys are brought into full bloom, and the most crushing sorrows test the stamina of a person's very being.
>
> Believe it or not, there is yet a fourth level, which is the dynamic basis of the three upper levels of experience. Although the top three levels are directly knowable to oneself, this fourth level is discovered and known only indirectly, that is, only in contrast with the other three. Thus a woman can be in good health on the first level, can be enjoying a full family life on the second level, can see her role in life as richly meaningful on the third level, and yet be restless and pain-filled on the fourth level. If it were not for this dramatic contrast with the top three levels, she could not possibly come to know the fourth level as part of her experience.

Hassel identifies this fourth level as the inmost being. He notes on p. 101 that Jesus on the cross had joy on the fourth level while feeling complete affliction and desolation on the upper three. (Or maybe he had expectation of joy on the fourth level, that might be more in keeping with the source verse for "joy" on the cross, Hebrews 12:2.)

"Powerlessness" has its own meaning that Hassel gives it. An illustration he gives of it is how John the Baptist was in the desert for years, Mary went through all kinds of particular things after her "let it be so", and Jesus also

was at the mercy of his ministry once it began. Something about how we live for years and years in particular parts of life we don't have much if any control over, and there's a prayer for this.

I can't remember if Hassel says this early in the book or if I'm making this up (it took me a while to read, so the beginning of the book is relatively distant to me), but I possess the feeling that his "Prayer-Experiences" could be read as "experiences or places in life which are prayer". There's a quote from the Psalms that I like that says "In return for my love they accuse me, but I am prayer". Well, it says that in the ESV and not in other translations, but I think it's a plausible translation, maybe the best. And what am I if not my life? I think there can be a distinction between me and my life, but at the same time, me living my life is a big part of me, so I am prayer when I live my life of powerlessness. The whole place in life of powerlessness itself is communion with God.

The book had a discussion about bitterness that I also found helpful.

There were other parts I was less interested in, but for what's mentioned in this review, I can recommend this book.

Labels: #book review, #Christianity, #God, #maturity, #note, #personal, #prayer, #psychology, #relationships, #seeking, #spiritual

Legitimacy

%legitimacy

Tuesday, June 30, 2020

This post replaces a previous one on the same topic.

11 Sep 2020: minor edits.

See also this post about how "reality is law". Also, this note on what is unbearable to legitimacy. Also, this post about what might be required of legitimacy if biblical justice and Atonement are not essentially part of legitimacy.

Two more notes: bearing burdens is necessary, but may not be sufficient, for legitimacy, and democracy as burden-bearing.

15 April 2022: I link to this file from "legitimism" sometimes. "Legitimism" is the argument or set of arguments that tries to show that God exists from the existence of legitimacy.

One way to look at reality is that it is basically just matter. We are conscious of it, but that's a footnote. Mainly, everything is matter.

If that's the case, then whatever is psychological is just "in our heads". We think it's true or valid, but it isn't. What's real is what's out in the open for everyone to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste.

Another way to look at reality is that it is all consciousness. We have perceptions of matter, but matter doesn't exist in itself. Consciousness just is its contents. This consciousness could be some kind of meaningless goo, like a film of static projected on a wall.

A third way to look at reality is that it is personal. We are most certain that we exist, persons exist. We are conscious, but also personal. So then consciousness always has a personal dimension and can't be "meaningless goo".

A fourth way to look at reality is that it is conceptual. For instance, the set of all objects is a real thing. If it were to no longer refer to a particular object, the object would cease to exist.

Is it possible to reconcile all these views of reality? We could say that concepts are conscious persons, or that persons are concepts, or perhaps that some concepts are dependent on larger concepts for existence, that is, on "large-enough" persons.

What about "oughts"? What are "oughts"? If there ought to be a

lawnmower on the lawn, what is that "ought to be"? If I do something useful that needed to be done, what is the "ought" implied by "useful" and "needed to be done"?

Oughts correlate tightly with ises. If we consider a lawnmower on the lawn, if it in no way ought to exist, it doesn't. Oughts themselves must be.

Which is more powerful, ought or is? Under the "all is matter" point of view, is is taken to be supreme, and ought is subordinate. But under the other three views, ought could have independent validity, as a conscious being, a person, or a concept with its own inherent power.

Does is precede ought? Then in the (logical) instant before it justifies itself just by being, was it valid? And if it was invalid, could it exist? Does ought precede is? Then how could any ought exist, in order to bring about is?

So there can be a problem if we split ought and is. One approach to solve it is to fuse is and ought. Again, all oughts are, and all that is in any capacity is a kind of ought. That a rose is is that it ought to be. Horrible things can both ought to be and not at the same time. Free will can be legitimate and lead to behaviors which are allowable as following from free will but which themselves are illegitimate. The juxtaposition of this legitimacy with this illegitimacy is a horror.

If an ought is, what is it? One solution is to say that an ought is an opinion. Opinions are conscious, parts of persons. They are concepts or something like concepts, the concept of "such ought to be so". You could say an opinion just is a person, relating in a certain way at a certain moment to what is/should be according to their preferences. (Or you could say that each person is an overall opinion, a relation to what is/should be, and that that opinion has sub-parts.)

Not all opinions are fully valid. But being is something that is unquestionable. Where does such absolutely valid opinion come from? A fully valid opinion is one given by a person who knows what they are talking about and is worthy of respect. A valid opinion about reality as a whole comes from someone who knows reality as a whole. So for reality as a whole to exist, there must be a person who knows reality as a whole.

And this person must be respect-worthy. One way to think about "respect-worthy" is, are you a real person? In the sense of "So and so is *real*". There's a kind of everyday meaning to that. Such a person really cares -- they are reliable and serious, do not pretend to be your friend when they are not, things of that nature. This might be considered a personal way to look at it. An impersonal, or less personal, way to look at it would be to say, what are persons made out of, and then how can we maximize that quantity? If persons are conscious experience, then what is personal consciousness "made out of"? It seems like all experiences are a form of trust (trust as "receptivity to enhancement"). I trust my eyes to show me horrible things.

I trust my doubts which turn me from trusting propositions. I'm open to existing because on some level, perhaps in some small way, I am open to in some sense being made better by my openness. My disposition to trust means that I seek to trust all kinds of experiences, as much as is appropriate and possible.

Another more personal way to look at respect-worthiness is to consider an important subset of ought, which is morality. If someone is setting up morality, they are laying burdens on the people under their law. Is the law-giver willing to experience this burden?

A real person, a trust-maximizing person, and a good leader, would all submit to the law they were making others stand up under.

So then, if we are interested in knowing what kind of being, what kind of opinion, what kind of ought, were the fundamental authority over reality, then we should look for one who suffered what it made others suffer.

We can see this source of legitimacy in a God who suffers, who suffers both all of what we do in an unlimited capacity, and who knows limitation and death, as we do. A God capable of experiencing these things would be disposed to do so, if he was valid enough to found reality.

Therefore, if this all is true, any ought that is is grounded in God, and if we think we are making a valid judgment, we ought to do so keeping in mind God's ultimate authority and what aspects of God's nature raise his respect-worthiness to the point of having that authority. And we, who claim to be on God's side if we make a moral judgment, are therefore promised a trustworthy future, putting God first, so we should not make our judgments out of anxiety or self-righteousness, because we are not "gods in a godforsaken world".

The Euthyphro dilemma says that if God is supposed to be good, is it due to his fiat, or due to him being aligned with a higher good? According to the drift of this article, the higher good itself would have the power/ legitimacy to authorize God's very existence, and would be the real God.

Labels: #God, #longer, #morality, #ontology, #philosophy, #politics, #trust

Values of Altruists

%values-of-altruists

Monday, July 13, 2020

Values of altruists, based on this thread.

Altruism: concern for other sentient beings. A larger moral circle is better than a smaller one. Components:

> other-orientation / relative lack of self-focus
>
> (curiosity is an intellectual version of this)
>
> hope (a fusing of something like optimism with openness to evidence, a kind of trust)
>
> personal connection with reality (maybe a sense of moral obligation, a connection with other being's subjective states, or a taste for a better world)
>
> inclination to work

Support values/practices to the value of altruism:

> "moral uncertainty (normative uncertainty in general)" -- helps keep an ethical/social movment from becoming fanatical
>
> (another approach being "you trust God, and thus you know things, and thus you don't act as though God doesn't exist to underpin your well-being and be the authority in your place")
>
> rationality -- disciplined thinking helps find problem areas and address them effectively
>
> outcomes matter
>
> don't only do emotionally appealing things
>
> effective communication -- work with the culture while trying to change it, listen, be disciplined / rational in speech and

listening, argue well

against politicization

for working / building rather than fighting / exposing

("exposing": "saying the unhealthy truth for truth's sake", or something like that)

for knowing and self-improvement

Support values that are riskier to promote culture-wide:

some kind of ambition is good

humility is good but trying to maximize humility is bad (being so humble you don't have any confidence in your knowledge prevents action)

courage is good but not foolhardiness

will is good, if it stays in touch with reality

being "real" is good (following through on promises, really having intentions)

personal sufficiency is good (you have enough or are enough to dare reach into someone else's reality)

These are riskier. I think one thing to remember is that ideas are things in people's minds, that culture is really embodied in people, not in words. A lot of culture is in interpersonal contact, which forms the context for ideas. So ideally, if you promote values, you shouldn't just say things, but should instruct people (or be in relationships with people) such that they really understand what you're saying. Genes become phenotype through epigenetics, and concepts become emotions, attitudes, and behaviors through the "epiconceptual". The epiconceptual could be the cultural background that informs how people hear a message (like "yes, this is the moral truth, but we don't actually expect people to live up to the moral truth"), or it could be the subcultural background from a relationship or community that makes it make sense. The practices and expectations of culture / subculture. So values are a thing which are not promoted just by communicators, but also by community-builders, and good communities

help make risky but productive words safe to spread.

Labels: #altruism, #communication, #courage, #culture, #God, #hope, #humanism, #life lessons, #listening, #morality, #note, #rationality, #relationships, #wisdom

Metaphysical Organism

%metaphysical-organism

Monday, July 20, 2020

I feel like there's a better version of this to be written, but this is what I have so far.

17 February 2021: Made improvements.

18 October 2022: See also Everything is Conscious Experience?

Let's say you are an effective altruist (an EA), looking to understand reality so as to best be able to do good. It turns out that we have theoretical reasons for believing a certain mysterious sea creature lives under the ocean. We also have many, but not 100% conclusive, sightings of that sea creature. Otherwise we might think that its part of the abyssal plain is uninhabited, and store nuclear waste there. But if it does exist, it will suffer greatly from the pollution.

Ordinarily, an EA might do something like say "Let's come up with some subjective probability estimates -- maybe 60% there is a sea creature, 40% there isn't" and then use that in weighing whether or not to store the nuclear waste there. Maybe we fear that the sea creature could suffer -100,000 utils if we put the waste there. But in another part of the abyssal plain, there is another possible sea creature that could suffer -100,000 utils. We could multiply the likelihood of a sea creature existing by its level of expected suffering to determine in which part of the abyssal plain to store the nuclear waste (or maybe we just decide not to store the nuclear waste under the ocean at all). A possible sea creature can have a significant effect on policy.

I want to consider a metaphysical creature (although, technically, "creature" may be the wrong word, "organism" may be better), which we have good theoretical reasons to think might exist, and of which we also have many sightings, which at least up until now have not been considered 100% conclusive by the epistemic mainstream. I will focus on the theoretical reasons for thinking the organism might exist, and on practical outcomes of taking into account this possibility.

--

A "metaphysical organism" is simply one which goes beyond physics. Why should we think that there is something beyond physics? When we look at observed reality, we realize that there is such a thing as perceptions of matter, and such a thing as consciousness. We can suppose that really,

everything that is is matter, and then consciousness arises out of that. Or we can suppose that everything that is is consciousness, and we simply have perceptions of matter. Or we can suppose that there is such a thing as matter, and consciousness, and the two interact.

It's hard to imagine how matter and consciousness could interact, because they are so different from each other. It's also hard to imagine how consciousness could arise from matter. What's easy to imagine is that we perceive matter -- we are consciousness and consciousness can interact with consciousness.

If I am going to be a philosopher, or an empiricist (someone who examines experience), then all that exists is my stream of consciousness. And yet I observe that there are things which do not follow from me, and so there is some other reality at play than my own. So I am just a bubble of experience, or an experience-body. But I somehow touch other experiences. I change things in my experience-body because I prefer them to be different and I act on that preference. In the way in which I am conscious, I have preferences and act. I will changes in my experience-body. I am consciousness and I will changes. Consciousness acts by willing. So whatever it is that modifies my experience-body apart from me, is something that willed that change.

How would such a being, or such beings, connect with me? We could try to use a physical metaphor: an experience-body is like a sphere, and when the surfaces of two spheres touch, there is a connection. But that's using a physical metaphor. If we only use experience-language, it seems most natural to think that when the spheres overlap, what's really happening is that one being experiences exactly what the other one does -- not a copy, but the very same experience. We don't observe ourselves doing this with any other sentient beings. We have experiences that are broadly analogous with those of other sentient beings, but certainly not the exact same. We experience metaphorical copies of what other beings experience.

So then, how do we connect with people? According to the Metaphysical Organism view, there's some other being that really does connect with each of us, who "serves" reality to each of us. This being is the Metaphysical Organism.

Without resorting to some things I've mentioned in other texts (simantism, legitimism), which may be able to specify that the Metaphysical Organism view is more or less the only one, there are other possibilities. It's possible to also believe in many, many beings, who create a web of these shared experiences. Under this view, my experience body is shared by many other beings, likely each only experiencing part of my experiences. Except, when I fall asleep at night, I cease to exist, yet when I wake up in the morning, I am in many striking ways similar to the being who fell asleep the night before. So it seems like there is some being who watches my experience

closely enough to recreate me each morning. Or some organization of beings who work together very closely to bring me back each morning in continuity with who I was before? Likewise, reality operates marvelously consistently, as we see with the viability of the natural sciences in knowing the world. It seems likely that if there are many metaphysical organisms (beings known through metaphysics rather than by sight), they are better organized than humans are, and their coordination is striking. How do many consciousnesses become one? By sharing consciousness with each other, or even by one consciousness containing all others, like a TV director whose visual consciousness includes all the visible monitors showing different camera angles. You could see the many consciousnesses being on one end of a spectrum of "manyness vs. oneness", and as they become better connected and organized, the more they become like the one Metaphysical Organism at the other end of the spectrum.

It may be more clear to ask, is there one "server" of conscious connection or many / a "peer-to-peer" network? (Or to say that the question is, "Berkeleianism" (one server) "or a kind of panpsychism?" (many / peer to peer).) Let's suppose that we can't know for sure which is which. Then what? We might say "50% chance for the Metaphysical Organism" or "50% chance for the many consciousnesses". The exact number is somewhat made-up. But if we're trying to figure out whether to store "nuclear waste" in some quadrant of reality, we should take seriously both possibilities represented by the probability estimates. If we assign subjective probabilities for these that are very, very low, we aren't taking them very seriously. It may be possible to rule out one or the other, through additional reasoning not used in this post. But taking them both seriously is a good default.

So, wishing to expand our moral circles to include all sentient beings, we have some reason to act and think as though the MO exists (the server reality), and also that there are many other consciousnesses (the peer-to-peer reality). This should be a motion, derived from ethical concerns, to consider such beings as possibly existing.

What would it mean for the MO to exist?

The MO would be perfectly empathic with all sentient beings. No gap in understanding like with human empathy. It would endure great suffering -- the first-order suffering of experiencing exactly what each being experienced, and the second-order suffering of thinking about each being.

The MO seems to have a lot more power over our experiences than we do, and could perhaps flood us with endorphins, but does not. This is odd -- why permit so much suffering? The MO experiences suffering exactly as we do, finds it exactly as unacceptable as we sometimes do in the moment. There may be some limitation on the MO's power. One explanation would be that our free will in some sense matters, and that we need to be

perfectly in tune with the MO in the long run, or we'll continue to cause it pain. Our dispositions, preferences, come into tune as *we* decide they should, that decision being the evolution of preference and disposition. So the process takes a long time and is complicated, and involves a lot of pain. What this means is that the MO values us highly (is willing to experience a lot of pain for us).

We don't necessarily know what the MO wants, other than for something like the elimination of pain or betrayal of all sentient beings someday. Since it values us highly, we have reason to think it wants to keep us alive as long as possible. But having a relationship with the MO seems to be essential to someday coming into tune with it. So to the extent that we believe in the MO, we should try to connect with it. And there should always be some amount that we try to connect with it, at least a few words of prayer once in a while (that do not threaten to take resources away from things we are sure need to be addressed, if that's our concern).

If there are many consciousnesses, then we should do similarly costless things for all plants, objects, concepts, and forms of matter, all of which might have some kind of consciousness, for all we know. Or those who are more convinced can be more considerate.

--

Some mention was made of "sightings" of the MO. What would those be? Billions of people believe in God (for instance, Christians and Muslims). It can be argued that a basic belief in God is a perception of God (a claim William Alston advances). Many theists "just believe", rather than basing their belief on any framework based on inferences from any other facts. So it is like these millions of people perceive God -- they see him noetically, just as one can see a memory or a concept noetically, and this could be considered a sighting of God, by analogy with a sighting of a sea creature.

Have they sighted the God of Christianity? Or the God of Islam? Or some other version of God? Traditionally, God (or these traditional images of God) are known through revelation and perhaps-ambiguous personal experience. The revelations are clear enough (stored as relatively detailed texts that can be taught and consulted), but where do they come from? Is there a reason to prefer one revelation over the other? So in order to give definition to the personal experiences, to say what it is that we see a glimpse of, we might want to rely on reason. Reason tells us that there may be a basically "God-shaped" thing in reality, something that noetically "looks like God", which we can "see", noetically -- the Metaphysical Organism.

Labels: #altruism, #God, #longer, #philosophy

Fiducial Utilitarianism

%fiducial-utilitarianism

Monday, July 20, 2020

I quickly wrote this up to replace what I had before, which I thought was poorly written, and which I don't agree with as much. But you can read it here if you want.

A few days later (30 January 2021)... I wrote up one more try to define fiducialism... I agree with that new one and this one that you are reading, but the new one probably is slightly better conceptually. But this one connects to effective altruism a little better. The 2018 booklet on fiducialism goes into more detail, in a more "Continental philosophy" style, and I can recommend it still. I am struggling to make a definitive version, as you can see, but all my attempts have significant overlap, so you hopefully should be able to have a fairly good idea of what "fiducialism" is.

Receptivity to Reality is an important addendum to the fiducialism posts.

As altruists, we seek human well-being. How should we define "well-being"? There are different inputs into this definition, including the popular hedonism and preferentialism. This post describes another, called "fiducialism".

"Fiducial" in this context means "pertaining to trust". Trust (following Joseph Godfrey's definition in *Trust of People, Words, and God*) is "receptivity to enhancement". A fiducial utilitarianism would seek to maximize trust. It would try to facilitate or encourage an increase in receptivity to enhancement in humans (or animals, if that can be measured). It would also try to minimize betrayal. "Betrayal", by my definition, is "an insult to the organ of trust", as though the brain (or the body) were organs of trust which could be stressed, shocked, paralyzed, etc. by betrayals. After a betrayal, for a while, or even permanently, someone who has been betrayed can't trust, or trust to as great an extent.

Fiducialism opposes a narrowing of horizons and a settling on what is less than the best. Hedonism and preferentialism are consistent with this narrowing and settling. Humans who adopt hedonism can always quit seeking reality once they've got their wealth (their secure pleasure). Who would really want to seek for the greatest pleasure? Those who do are being fiducialists, in perhaps an immature (child- or adolescent-like) way, if they choose the "smaller infinity" of "infinite" (maximized) pleasure over receptivity to reality. Fiducialism is in favor of the truth in itself. To trust is to be personally open to what is outside yourself, which extends to both facts and people. Fiducialism favors depth and opposes complacency.

Some betrayals are bad, some are good, in the long run, for increasing trust. Sometimes being broken down opens us up, sometimes it doesn't. To trust heroically involves trusting life when it is at its worst. Finding the best in what is bad and rigorously valuing it. Valuing all the good. Pain can be a betrayal, so can confusion. Physical death prevents trusting (to the extent that it is the permanent end of a life), although death can be trusted. Fiducialism avoids pain and death to some extent, like hedonism. A fiducialist should be prone to enjoyment, greater enjoyment than a hedonist to the extent that their attitude of openness to what is makes them more receptive to the pleasure of reality, although there may be more pain in their lives as well.

Ultimately, trusting is a disposition, and not a flow of experience. So fiducialism is person-focused and not experience-focused. Is a person inclined to being receptive to enhancement? Then *they* are trusting.

Unofficially, people are already hedonists, preferentialists, and fiducialists, (and other "-ists") in some mixture. An altruist is likely to be more fiducialist than hedonist, unofficially, although they might hold to hedonism. Idealism is more fiducialist than it is hedonist or preferentialist.

I would say that if we were trying to pursue altruism without recourse to technology, promoting fiducialism would be a priority. (If we have to work with humans, we would want a more fiducialist population.) I'm not sure that is the case in the future. Technology may make it so that we no longer have to rely on human attitudes and spirits (for better or worse). But whatever we do, we shouldn't narrow our horizons in favor of what is convenient. One might think expanded horizons applies to exploring outer space, but I would like to say that more important is exploring the true nature of inner space, of being a personal being.

Labels: #altruism, #longer, #morality, #philosophy, #trust

Impatient for Holiness

%impatient-for-holiness

Monday, July 20, 2020

Edit: added important caveat to the end.

Recent blog posts (Simantism, Legitimacy, Metaphysical Organism), and perhaps ones to come talk about a God in whom one might believe without believing in the Bible. At the same time, this God is compatible with at least one reading of the Bible, the New Wine System. So for any people who might be convinced by the above, we have questions about that God. One question has to do with holiness.

In the above view, God needs us to become holy. This is the point of all existence on earth, with all its temptations and suffering. We all want the world to become more holy at times. We feel an impulse to criticize and set straight. When evil happens to us, we want justice to be served. We might seek just revenge. We might feel like we are David in a world of wicked Goliaths. We are offended at the self-righteousness of the righteous. We become impatient to bring about the holiness of other people.

This is the source of a lot of pain. Can we afford to live lives of pain? So we tend to want to say "just forget about holiness" -- except in those moments where we are impatient for it. "Just forgive." But in the moments where we crave holiness, we do so in part because of the truth. Holiness is truth. So to "just forgive" is a lie, something which we know in those moments of needing holiness. Certainly it's possible for there to be infinite forgiveness if God pays for it, but we still have to repent, and if we never repent, then we can never be fully in tune with God. And God can't stand a dissonance forever, any more than we could.

The worldview of legitimism, simantism, and the New Wine System is such that everyone really does have to repent of all their sins. We really have to change. The truth is never fuzzed over. Complacency is deadly. Yet, because God's value is for our preservation, for us to be brought to holiness, not to be destroyed, we are granted a long but not infinite period of time in which to change. It is enough time, if we really want to change. And if we are afraid that we don't really want to change, we can ask God to help us want to change, and by wanting to change that much, we open the door to him helping us to really and fully repent.

Because this process lasts a long time and involves the help of God, we should look on unholy people from the point of view of patience. (Even in a sense, we should be patient with our own unholiness, although without

being complacent.) We might have to be prudent to avoid the effects of unholy people, but we can wait, and let them take their time -- dissonant though that may be.

I would say that this is not an absolute. There is a place for the spirit of "it needs to change". Change happens against a backdrop of people having time and being loved by God. You can exhort or rebuke when there's time in which the message can fully work.

Labels: #Christianity, #God, #holiness, #Jesus, #note

Hypocrisy

%hypocrisy

Monday, July 20, 2020

Any idealistic person, if they want people to follow a common standard more strictly, may really want the world to be a better place, and for people to benefit from compliance with the standard. But other people may not like to be called to such a standard, and will react by asking "Do you live up to that standard?"

Often, the idealistic person can't say that they do. But the standard is still good, and it would still be good if we all complied with it. And, we are likely to comply with the standard most if we consciously aspire to.

If your goal is to see the world be a better place through better behavior or attitudes, then you might ask "Do you live up to the standard?" of someone else who also had that goal, and they might say "no", but you would understand. You too know how hard it is to live up to the standard, and you would support them in pursuing the standard.

People who are not interested in seeing the standard met, whether because they prefer to be better than others (they find it relatively easy to meet the standard, so they don't value it), or because they don't value the outcome of the standard, or think it's not their responsibility, will say "Do you live up to the standard?" in a way that does not lead to people actually aspiring to the standard, and undermine the project of standard-compliance that a nation or subculture takes on.

If we understand standards as being things that are meant for a better world, that is better than seeing them as markers of moral status. To say "this behavior is right" can lend itself to the marker of moral status reading. But there are behaviors that are really right, and it's the truth to say that they are. But if we don't also understand that we are living for a world that doesn't exist yet, a truly good one, then right and wrong can become detached from that good world, and become either autonomous horrors or merely markers of the behavioral pecking order.

So we can remember Abraham, who had faith, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Faith in what? That a nation would come from him that would bless every family. The real blessing is for people to be right with God -- so, to be, in some ways, "perfect", to be true and pure. Abraham wasn't perfect. But he was living for a day when the world would be actually and fully good.

Labels: #culture, #God, #morality, #note, #relationships

Epiconcept and Episcripture

%epiconcept-and-episcripture

Wednesday, July 22, 2020

Genetic code is expressed epigenetically. The DNA is useless by itself. It's actually "read" and then embodied by epigenetics, which can "choose" different aspects of the gene to express.

So it is with concepts, and scriptures. Concepts and scriptures are put into place by people using them, providing the context for them.

A poorly epiconcepted concept can do a lot of damage, and when we suppress truths, it's sometimes to avoid problems with the epiconception of them. The marketplace of ideas lets loose ideas without any concern for their epiconcepts, and culture tries to keep up.

A scripture poorly episcriptured can also do a lot of damage, similarly. A religious community that can successfully support a text (make it actually not harmful, so that whatever benefit is in the text itself can come thorugh) can teach that text.

Labels: #definition, #philosophy, #politics, #rationality, #religion, #wisdom

MSLN

%msln

Sunday, July 26, 2020

Other posts referencing MSLN here.

I've tried coming up with a name for the worldview given by my writing, and I'm not sure I have a good name yet. So for now, at least in writing, I use "MSLN", which are the letters of Metaphysical Organism, Simantism, Legitimacy, and the New Wine System.

The New Wine System is a version of Christianity which says that people aren't finally judged when they die, but rather wait until the end of the world. Then everyone(*) is resurrected to new bodies free from effects of the Fall, and everyone(*) has a fair chance to work on their sinful habits, helped by other people who are more mature. They get 1,000 years to overcome all their sinful habits.

(* There are exceptions. At any point, in either this life or the next, if people are completely hardened to the voice of God calling them to holiness/spiritual maturity/genuine love, then they don't get resurrected, but instead are punished fairly for their sins, having rejected Jesus' forgiveness, and then don't exist anymore -- "annihilation", like that of death in the atheistic worldview. Those who refuse to fully mature are among these exceptions.)

That is a simplification, but I hope accurate enough as a quick introduction. More information about the New Wine System can be found at my source for it, here.

The ideas represented by the different letters of MSLN are meant to be compatible with each other, and can form one whole. It's certainly possible to pick one of the ideas in isolation, independent of the others. In other words, there is a certain amount of independence of the arguments, three philosophical and one doctrinal. I may use "MSLN" when a particular letter may, but does not necessarily, apply in context, but another letter or letters do necessarily apply.

2 January 2022: I use "MSL" to refer to the three philosophical arguments considered together apart from the doctrinal one.

MSLN could be looked at as a circle which includes a certain kind of philosophy and a certain kind of Christianity, which share the motivational structure which the New Wine System has in contrast to Catholicism and Protestantism (and maybe also in contrast to Eastern

Orthodoxy).

12 September 2023: Often on this blog, I use "New Wine" to refer to the basic idea of "you need to become holy; you will have the Millennium in which to become holy". I got this from Philip Brown's New Wine System but I think I should use (from now on) a different term for that basic idea, to allow Brown to have "New Wine" as his own label for his own writing. That basic idea can be called "millennial holiness".

11 February 2024: I now see the basic idea of MSLN as being "you need to become holy, emphasis on *you*, in other words it's up to you and you could choose not to; you will have the Millennium in which to become holy". So the new term I would use is "voluntary millennial holiness".

Labels: #Christianity, #definition, #God, #Jesus, #maturity, #philosophy, #religion

Millennial vs. Purgatorial

%millennial-vs-purgatorial

Sunday, July 26, 2020

23 April 2021: minor clarification.

Purgatory: one version is, a place people go to suffer to pay for their sins, then they can go to heaven.

The Millennium: one version is, 1,000 years, after this life on earth, in which people really learn to repent of all their sins, then they can go to heaven. (This is basically the idea of the future implied by "MSLN".)

Taken generally, "purgatorial" is the notion that people need to suffer to overcome some sort of defect or deficit they have. "Millennial" is the notion that people need to learn in order to overcome those defects or deficits.

Sometimes it seems like it takes pain in order to learn certain lessons. It may be the case sometimes. But the Millenial point of view is that it's better to bring about learning without pain. Also, it may seem like you're accomplishing something by suffering. Maybe it makes you a better person. But if you're suffering without it making you a better person, it's probably unnecessary. Suffering can keep you from learning.

Sometimes you don't know how to not suffer. Or suffering is an unavoidable part of some pursuit that has to be pursued. Certainly there are things worth suffering for. But what is essential is inner change, not pain.

Labels: #definition, #maturity, #personal, #relationships, #wisdom

Motivational Structure

%motivational-structure

Sunday, July 26, 2020

Edited to improve wording.

Hardening adds an important addendum.

What is motivation? "To be moved", "to be moving", "that which keeps you moving". A motivator is something that causes (forces, allures, leads, enables, etc.) a person to do something or become something they ordinarily wouldn't have, or to refrain from doing something or to not become something they ordinarily would have.

If the world is not as it should be, and this has something to do with human decisions, then an ingredient in making the world the way it should be is motivation, motivators.

What is a motivational structure? It's easier for me to describe one first:

In some forms of Buddhism, it can be assumed that you will eventually become enlightened, but you have to work for it. It may take many lifetimes. Millions of years. But someday, you'll make it. Nobody else can work for it for you. You have to take every step yourself. And then finally, you'll be free from the cycle of births and deaths. You work, you have to work, you will work enough.

This is mostly foreign to Christianity (except perhaps in Eastern Orthodoxy, which I don't know enough about to say). Usually, in Christianity, it's assumed that you are more passive. You aren't expected to bring yourself up to a standard. Maybe you'll have to suffer in purgatory (the Roman Catholic doctrine). Or, as a Protestant, you believe that repentance is a finished work at the moment of putting your faith in Jesus, and so whatever part you were to play in living up to the standard is done, and God will take care of the rest, and there is nothing you need to do more.

The "N" of MSLN, the New Wine System, teaches that repentance is a process that takes a long time to complete, that you have to do it yourself, and that you will see it to its conclusion -- much like the Buddhist motivational structure given above. What they may both have in common (certainly I would get this from the Buddhist structure, from my vantage point now as an outsider) is the sense that there is a big task you have to do, you have to do it yourself, and you will do it, and you can do it, so do it -- you might as well start now since you have to and inevitably will do

it.

Protestantism could be a tonic against burdening people with work that they can't possibly do -- even if in a sense the work is the work of repentance. There's a difference between "works-righteousness" and "repentance-righteousness", which Protestantism can tend to ignore, protecting against works-righteousness at the risk of losing repentance-righteousness. The motivational structure of works-righteousness is "you never know when the catastrophe is going to hit, and if you don't have enough supplies, you'll die" -- work anxiously to fend off death. The "catastrophe" is "meeting God in a final and decisive way" -- is your inmost being prepared to be one with God? The motivational structure of "anti-works-righteousness" is "you're going to be okay in the end, just get through the moment in an adequate way". The motivational structure of the New Wine System is "the catastrophe is going to take 1,000+ years to hit, so gather all the supplies." So there is a sense of "I have to do this, no one's going to do it for me, I have to take responsibility and take it seriously," but with far less anxiety.

There is or ought to be less anxiety because the conditions for living up to the standard are realistic. You have 1,000 years to do a task some people get close to finishing in 80 years on earth, and which most people could probably finish within 100 years in the Millennium. There, people get new bodies -- new brains. The thing that counts is the heart, the inmost being -- your real preferences, responsiveness, will, intentions. To the extent that we are currently saddled with defective minds that we don't choose or want, or are possessed by evil spirits, these no longer affect us. Likewise, the external culture in the Millennium is one conducive to spiritual maturity, which is not so much the case with what we have on earth. The exact number 1,000 may not be the number of years we get (it comes from Revelation, which is a vision), but the MSLN position is that God wants us to be saved and will give us a generous, although finite, amount of time in which to fully repent. All this to say that requiring people to do what they can do and which they can know that they can do (New Wine System) is different from requiring people to do something which not all of them can do and which they don't know that they can do (works-righteousness). It is also different from not requiring people to do more than some kind of token effort or minimal repentance (the "pray Jesus into your heart and that's all you need" doctrine of anti-works-righteousness).

I've given examples from religion, but what about the secular world? Peter Singer says "expand your moral circle to include everyone". There's a moral imperative -- it's like you're a murderer if you don't give $5,000 to save someone from malaria. After all, once you are aware of the possibility of helping, but don't do it, it was a life you could have saved, but chose not to. This imperative is something that's hard to live up to. So most people hear the word and then kick in a compensating "but we don't really

mean that" factor. People are aware of "starving children in Africa". But that compensating factor keeps them from doing what they can. So secular morality is something like a works-righteousness that is too much, crippled by an anti-works-righteousness that is too much. And this situation is operative to a large extent as well in the religious world.

Secular morality has the disadvantage over religious morality of having no solid enforcement behind it. People sometimes enforce it, but not always. Guilt feelings help enforce it, but if you can get around those, and societal pressures, you're fine, and thus not necessarily motivated. What is needed is a motivator which has enforcement behind it which is reasonable.

A religious person could object that having enforcement behind a motivator makes it so people only change out of fear of the enforcement. While this is a risk, if truly pursued, working to repent ought to get a person away from fear, because repentance involves coming to trust God and becoming a real person -- those who trust and are real do not fear enforcement, but enforcement is in some ways helpful with those who do not yet fully trust and are not yet fully real, helping produce trust and reality.

Can the "1,000+ year deadline" approach really change a person's deepest intentions and disposition? Can we come to love God based on a deadline? Or don't we have to simply wait for God to work in us? Certainly you can't make God speak in your life before his time. But there is an extent to which your will can produce changes in your behavior, beliefs, desires, and so on, affecting who you really are deep down.

Secular and religious morality are things that might be held "officially", assented to rationally, held to be good by some person by their own lights. It's possible to design a logical morality to be assented to rationally. But the real motivational structures of people are generally both rational and irrational. You may believe that something is true but not know it with your body. People can be motivated by physical hungers (food, sex, companionship), compulsions (perfectionism, compulsive sympathy), fatigue (physical fatigue, some kinds of physical nihilism or derealization, compassion fatigue), irrational or less-rational anger, inertia (habitual conservatism, stubbornness, irrational determination), irrational fear (of death, poverty, shame, etc.), boredom, or whatever else. These motivations can form their own interrelationships and be supported by different psychological realities to form motivational structures. And they may take up the majority of a person's thought life, at times. But sometimes, we can be rational, and choose the motivational structures that help us and follow from what we (rather than our drives) actually believe is the truth. And over time, those small moments of rationality set your life on a different course than if you had used them for a different purpose.

A motivational structure says "there is a reason for you to act or change,

and there is some reason you have, to think you can act or change." A motivational structure can say "don't worry", "don't despair", "don't be complacent", (all which can turn people away from trying), and also say "it is to your advantage, it is instrumentally rational, to start now" -- all of these messages combined in a mutually supportive structure.

Perhaps "motivational structure" can be defined as "the imperative to do a particular thing, and the supporting psychological materials (e.g. beliefs) that help make that happen". Perhaps something like a particular "do something" and its epiconcept.

Labels: #altruism, #Christianity, #God, #Jesus, #longer, #maturity, #morality, #psychology, #rationality

The End of the World Affects Motivation

%the-end-of-world-affects-motivation

Monday, July 27, 2020

One thing that affects a person's motivational structure is the rational or irrational belief that "the world is ending". Another way to look at this is that there is a certain field in which one can work, and if the field will be there, it's worth working in it, and you are motivated. But if the existence of the field is uncertain, you start to feel doubtful about working in it, and you lose motivation.

"World-ending" can come on a spectrum. The strongest world-ending would be the non-existence of all that exists. But people don't worry about that, and I don't know of a reason to think that will happen. I can think of a couple of less-extreme but still decisive world-endings, that have some basis to be foreseen. God (or the metaphysical organism) might see fit to end the current system, the current world. We would survive, but assuming that work we do now would make a difference in 100 years the way we thought it would now wouldn't make sense if this happened. A second is, we invent artificial intelligence that can change things so fast, so out of control, according to thought processes so foreign to us, that while we might exist after this rapid change (this "Singularity"), efforts that we expend now might have little to do with the way things are after it.

Neither of these two world-endings is certain to happen in my lifetime. But I can sense them affecting my thought process, from time to time. They can be demotivating. One of the best ways to motivate yourself to work in the present is to make a plan for the future. Suddenly, you will have a lot of intermediate steps to work on, in the present. I think our culture (or, a lot of it) has forgotten the future or never saw it, so that now we don't reach for the future and make the present better in the process. When I am most liberated from the present-only mindset, I can see numerous opportunities to make the present or near-future better. But when I am stuck in the present-only mindset, these things which I might do, even for the present, disappear to me.

I think I remember reading an anecdote about someone who worried about nuclear war in the 1950s and thought that worrying about bridge design didn't make a lot of sense, but then decades later was grateful to the people who did think about bridge design, since nuclear war hadn't happened to that point, and a person needed to drive on bridges after all.

(I want to say the anecdote might have been about Richard Feynman.) So we might hope that someone cares about the future even though it might not come. What if the Singularity, or the Apocalypse, or the Changing of the World, don't come for another 100, or 200 years? With respect to my lifetime, I then need to think long term, and there is a place for long term thinking, to address the field of earth in the 2100s or 2200s.

Edit (11 Sep 2020): after learning more, I think I would say "the Singularity" (as defined in this post) "may never really occur" (something so powerful and strange as to obviate current human investment in the future) "but many people think it will come in the next 50 years, if it does." I may write a longer post about this.

I think the MSLN answer to this question is to say: "What is most important is not altruism, but to be an altruist. An altruist necessarily cares about effectiveness. But being an altruist, to the best of your ability, or in whatever other way necessary becoming like God in who you are, is necessary at all times, no matter how futile things seem." Your horizon is always far in the future, with respect to your life on earth, and so if the things that you do here end up being mere gestures after the Singularity gets through with them, or after the world is ended by God, then at least you, with your inner being, survive to the next world. The field of you, of who you are, remains relevant, regardless of what happens with the outside world. So, if you have the time, work in whatever way you can, and if that way that you work presupposes that there is a relevant future, live that way, so that the imperishable part of you can certainly be invested in.

Labels: #courage, #culture, #desire, #futurism, #God, #hope, #imagination, #longer, #meaning, #psychology, #rationality

Video Poems: Introduction

%video-poems-introduction

Friday, July 31, 2020

I have some poems on YouTube.

These are simple, and maybe cryptic -- and that can be a good thing. But I also want to write commentaries about certain of them.

I call them "video poems" -- they were going to be "YouTube poems", but then I thought maybe someday I might release them somewhere else.

Labels: #video poem

Video Poem: On a long journey to the truth

%video-poem-on-long-journey-to-truth

Friday, July 31, 2020

{{Embedded YouTube video of my video poem "On a long journey to the truth" (aka LongJourney on archive.org)}}

This video might make it sound like happiness is a bad thing. Like you're supposed to push yourself, never let up -- that itself is the truth.

I don't think that happiness is opposed to the truth. But happiness is a byproduct of a life that's aimed at the truth, a byproduct that helps you do what you need to do. Pleasure is a kind of psychic fuel. It can be hard to do without it. And pain often accompanies damage, and damage will hold you back.

But if you make happiness your goal, you will more than likely stop short of the truth. Why would you think you would find a thing if you stopped looking once you set your eyes on another thing? It might happen coincidentally, but wouldn't be more likely than that. Making happiness your goal might not even make you happy, and stopping at that goal rather than trying for something else might leave you both miserable and disconnected from the truth.

Labels: #altruism, #desire, #maturity, #mental strength, #personal, #psychology, #video poem

Hardening

%hardening

Tuesday, August 4, 2020

Over time, I have somewhat struggled to express my thoughts about this topic, which I consider sensitive and important. So more than other posts, it's probably best to read all of the links on this page, or at least the following in blockquotes. Let me know if you don't understand something. I will probably try to rewrite this (likely, much of the MSLN material) at some point.

> *An important addendum here.*
>
> *Is it okay to not listen to some voices?*
>
> *What would it feel like to harden yourself?*
>
> *Some discussion of emotional regimes as they relate to hardening.*

Edited to improve wording.

27 May 2021: added mention of the danger of hate, and made other minor edits.

There's an important oversight in Motivational Structure which I want to address here.

In the New Wine System (the "N" of MSLN), it is believed that the people who don't make it to heaven are those who close themselves off to Jesus' voice, which teaches them to be righteous and more spiritually mature. People harden (even becoming completely hardened) because they are very uninterested in God on a deeper level, are no longer interested in trusting and therefore connecting to reality on the deepest level, or have come to hate Jesus, are an enemy of him, and are no longer interested in hearing what he has to say.

If you hear all this and care about whether you care about Jesus' voice and about the possibility of hardening, then you still have Jesus' voice speaking to you. The voice is not necessarily something you read or hear, but can be, and is essentially what you hear in your inner self, deep down, as you live your life. But if you don't care, you're in danger of hardening yourself. What this means is that it is dangerous to be complacent. If you're worried, you're not complacent. But if you aren't worried, or aren't disposed to grow, you may be complacent. It is also dangerous to hate, to throw away reality.

Does this translate to the "MSL" parts of MSLN? God in those frames is someone with whom we must come into tune in order to share eternity with him. It is in God's interests to actively shape us as he interacts with us. Ultimately he is the one who tells us how to grow into tune with him. So, we can listen to his voice, or not. And if we stop listening to his voice, we can't save ourselves, since part of being saved is being open to God's work in us. We are disposed to becoming like God, or not, and if we become complacent, we may lose the ability for our dispositions to change in his direction.

What this means for the motivational structure is that not only do you have a deadline somewhere "1000+ years" in the future, but if you don't remain open to the process of pursuing it, you may lose out. You have to value pursuing it, even if you aren't good at achieving it in the near term. What you fear is not failing to measure up to the standard which is required of you, but failing to care about seeking to measure up. If you fear, and continue to seek, then you are still open. But if you don't fear, or don't seek, then you are in danger. No one is not competent enough to care (to fear and seek). Even if you aren't an emotional person, as long as you can make decisions, you can care through those. If, through some disability apart from who you really are, you can't make decisions or have emotions, then God can give you a new body someday so that you do, if you are at least minimally disposed to seek him. If you hope in this, this is a disposition of seeking.

People are motivated both by having a big task ahead of them, and also by fear for their well-being. In MSLN, both are present, in ways that have strength but are also reasonable. There is a fear that is far off in the future, and a fear that is as close as death, for those who do not fear.

Labels: #God, #note, #psychology

Video Poem: A fly's freedom

%video-poem-flys-freedom

Friday, August 7, 2020

{{Embedded YouTube video of my video poem "A fly's freedom" (aka FlysFreedom on archive.org)}}

I was inspired to write this when I was catching a fly to release outside. My usual technique is to isolate the fly in the room I am in (easy when I'm in my bedroom using my laptop), and then open the curtains on the window, or the window itself so that fresh air comes in. The fly's deepest longing (if I judge by behavior), is to be outside. It will fly to that window even though it is closed, and spend its time there.

The fly doesn't understand how the human world works, and is just trying to do what it knows best. It's actually doing the wrong thing sometimes by staying near the window. If there's a door open somewhere else in the house, it should just find the door and fly out the house. But it doesn't know any better, and just thinks (or acts like it thinks): the appearance of freedom shows where you get freedom.

Sometimes this leads to the death of flies. I used to kill flies when I saw them on the window, rather than catch them and release them. So in that version of the human environment, the desire for freedom, seeking it the best way the flies knew how, led to death. They should have increased their intelligence and flown nearby the front door, so that they could slip out whenever the humans opened it.

But because I am actually a good person with respect to the fly's desire for life and freedom, the environment that I create makes it so that when the fly, unjustified though it may be in assuming this, thinks (or "thinks"), "I will go toward freedom -- it's right there, I can see it -- I can smell the fresh air -- somehow that's the way out", it's actually a trustworthy move for the fly to make, in ways that it does not understand.

I approach the fly with a small glass cup and put the cup over the area on the window or screen that the fly is on. The fly thinks the cup is prison, and it is. It takes off -- some flies more untrusting than others -- flies around inside the cup. Eventually, it lands on the inner surface of the cup long enough for me to quickly pick up the cup and put my hand over the opening. Now the fly is very much a prisoner, and is taken far away from the promise of freedom, through the rest of the house to the door.

I open the door and keep the fly inside its transport, and then step outside and close the door, so that if I release the fly it doesn't go straight back

into the ultimately unwelcoming human environment. Then I take it down to the most favorable part of the back yard, near the compost heap, which I assume is where a fly would most like to be, and where I assume it is best to be a fly -- although flies are perfectly capable of getting around, to seek their own best environments. Then I let the fly go. Sometimes it takes a moment to grasp that it is free, or I help it out of the glass cup. And then it flies away.

Because the fly looks for freedom so predictably, I was able to capture and imprison it, and give it true freedom.

An MSLN view: we might have different intuitions about life depending on whether we find ourselves in the presence of a beneficent super-human environment (whatever is beyond human agency and/or our ability to sufficiently mentally grasp), or a negative one. The MSLN assumption is that we should adjust our priors in the direction that there is a being who would be inclined to help us, and might do so. And so if that is true, we should go toward freedom, like a fly trying to escape the spacious prison of a house.

Labels: #desire, #faith, #fear, #formulas, #God, #hope, #imagination, #life choices, #psychology, #trust, #video poem

Vineyard

%vineyard

Sunday, September 6, 2020

Toward the beginning of Song of Solomon:

1:6

> Don't stare at me because I am dark, because the sun has scorched me. My mother's sons were angry with me. They made me keeper of the vineyards. I haven't kept my own vineyard.

The person who says this is a woman, known as the Shulammite, a bride of Solomon.

What does she mean by "vineyard"? "I haven't kept my own vineyard." Is she talking about self-care?

Have you kept your own vineyard?

I encourage you to read Song of Solomon to try to see what she's talking about. It's not very long.

Labels: #bible reading, #love, #personal

Things to Do

%things-to-do

Wednesday, September 9, 2020

EDIT 22 Sep 2020: added a section on activism.

EDIT 2 Apr 2021: changed emphasis away from "This is a response to *How Can We Love*?".

EDIT 22 July 2021: minor addition.

EDIT 25 Oct 2022: added a section on "domestic missions".

EDIT 30 Jul 2024: added a note about Modest Needs, due to the story about its founder embezzling from it.

Let's say you are motivated either by the MSLN motivational structure, or by Jesus' parable of the talents / minas, or other Biblical passages, or even perhaps by secular arguments like Peter Singer's Drowning Child Illustration. If this motivation is new to you, the circle of your concern has widened and/or the intensity of your commitment to helping has increased. What practical thing can you do, to act on that motivation? This post contains some basic ideas. I haven't tried all of the ideas here and I'm not very experienced in anything other than being a writer and having lived my particular life story, so take all of this with a grain of salt.

First I want to say that desire is more important than effect, in the long run. Good desire will lead to effectiveness, but a focus on effectiveness that neglects desire will leave you dead inside, and you will likely lose effectiveness and find it difficult to motivate yourself.

We think that desires are invalid without practical effect, but desires are valuable in themselves, and will naturally lead to effects when possible.

You have to safeguard your ability to desire. Perhaps at the very root of you, no one but you is responsible for your desires. But much of your mind can become discouraged or broken by the people you associate with, or the people you lack in your life who would have helped you if you knew them. Finding people who genuinely agree with your values is probably the most helpful thing in this area.

If you would like some suggestions of things to do, here are some below. I expect to update this page at some point, so check back to see what's new.

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First of all, if you care about all the people on earth, and want to do

something for them, you may think you should do something that involves going to another country. Perhaps being a missionary or working in the international development industry.

If you're good at the skills needed, you can go into medicine or agriculture in developing countries. If you have organizational abilities, you can be a program administrator. All of these things, working for a charity. You might make a good fundraiser for a charity. You may find work from a government agency. You can go to school for development.

I've heard from one development insider that they don't like random people coming into their field who don't know what they're doing. So that's something to think about.

Some development charities are effectively forms of agricultural or medical missions. In addition, you can work in a purely cultural way, in missions. You can do altruistic things from a Christian perspective, living in another country.

Being a missionary is not necessarily glamorous. You may have to work a day job that has little or nothing to do with ministry. You may have to raise support (mail or call or hang out with a lot of people to encourage donations).

People don't always like what foreigners do in their countries, and this applies to both development and missions. Being competent and culturally sensitive is important, and something you should try to learn from others instead of messing up yourself, if you can help it.

I wrote a book a while ago called *How Can We Love?*. It contains a section on "devastation" -- being broken down in a way that connects you with reality, seeing your brokenness, and the world's brokenness, and then seeing how to act. If you get what "devastation" is about, that's a good sign as far as being able to execute these roles. A spirit of sobriety, even if your work involves connecting with people, which can favor warmth.

One thing the roles have in common is being able to relate to a culture you were not born into. This is something not everyone can do effectively.

I studied international agricultural development at UC Davis and wanted to teach people better farming techniques. I'm more of a teacher by temperament. But I found out partway through that they really wanted program administrators. I finished the degree, but might have chosen something different if I'd known. You can save yourself a mistake like that by figuring out in advance what people in your prospective field actually do. Maybe see if you can interview someone who is working in that field.

(But then I looked up the two classmates whose names I could remember and saw that one of them works as an "agricultural research and training

coordinator", and another one had been associated with a charity that teaches farmers better methods to use in small-scale agriculture -- the same thing that I wanted to do with my degree all along. It's possible that I could have worked for them, as either a teacher or teacher trainer, or perhaps there are other charities doing the same thing. The takeaway lesson for you from this paragraph may be the same as from the one before: look around, yourself, when considering career options. The person who told me that the IAD degree was for program administration and not teaching farmers was my major advisor.)

There can be risks to working in developing countries. Health risks, risks from crime, political risks, etc.

If I were talking to an 18-year-old who seemed to have the same basic interests as my 18-year-old self (interested in development or perhaps ag missions, going to a developing country), I would say "find an organization to learn from". It might be better to get hands-on experience at a low level in an actual organization (if they'll have you) before getting a degree. You'll have a better understanding of reality when you go to get your education, have more hooks to hang your learning on.

(If someone involved in missions or development happens to read this and wants to add to or correct these thoughts, please do so in the comments.)

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I think in general it is best for people to solve their own problems. So it is better if people in developing countries (and developed countries) work on their own countries or regions. Nowadays, culture is globalizing more and more, and I can see the possibility of my writing (such as this post, or *How Can We Love?*) being read by English speakers outside the developed world. I do think there's a role for helping other cultures through roles like development and missions. On the other hand, sometimes when you help someone, it improves their agency, and sometimes it doesn't. So that's something to consider. I think it could be good to connect people in different countries in a common altruistic culture, to talk about these issues and share inspiration.

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An idea that combines missions and working in your own culture is to go as a sort of missionary to people groups in your own culture that could be benefited by what you know or believe. I have some experience "going to" atheist cultures -- a "shining moment" was when one atheist said something like "You really care" in reference to me being a Christian who took the Problem of Evil seriously. It's vulnerable and lonely work and you will be influenced by the people you go to. (And I think it's best if it's vulnerable, lonely (in that you are outnumbered), and influences you that way.) It could help with things like political polarization, or help reduce

divides between different Christian groups and between them and non-Christian groups.

Because it's analogous to foreign missions, the caveats mentioned above in that section about "devastation", cultural sensitivity, etc. also apply.

(This could be called "domestic missions", I guess.)

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Another role for "devastation" type people could be political leader, or some other kind of leader (business, academia, etc.). Leaders need to be able to take on stress and risk, have integrity but also know how to be effective with other people, be willing to take a fall for what's right, and... I think there are other things I'm not thinking of (this is an area I might explore more later).

I would say, do this if you're willing to live a life like Jesus (potentially being in the public eye, potentially working to exhaustion, potentially having a kind of Gethsemane or crucifixion). And, at the same time, you still need to be able to be into effectiveness, organizational skills, have command of facts, and be sober. It's certainly not for everyone.

It's not uncommon for political leaders to go through many years of being more or less an apprentice. You have to become acculturated to the system (and yet not really acculturated) in order to change it.

A business leader needs to be able to run a business. Academic leaders generally need to have academic careers. Military leaders need to work through the military. There are already a lot of resources available on leadership, and I haven't read much of them. But I may be interested in thinking and writing more in that area, at some point.

(If you are in a position of leadership and wish to add to or correct the above, please do so in the comments.)

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If you get involved in politics, you might do so at the level of activism, as a political foot-soldier or organizer. I think this could be a good thing if you keep the attitude of "devastation" in mind. Politics is like war, a way of applying force to other people.

Just as it makes sense for there to be people who work within military culture to make it better, so there should be people who work within political culture to make it better.

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You can try to "earn-to-give". This is a term taken from the effective altruist movement (who might make an interesting study for people

interested in the question of what to do with their lives or resources).

The basic idea of "earn-to-give" is that you earn as much money as you can, and then spend a modest amount on yourself, and either give the difference now to worthy charities, or save your money to give later (perhaps in your estate), or a mixture of the two. Figuring out worthy charities is an interesting task, and the effective altruists have some secular suggestions. If you want a Christian perspective, I know of the National Christian Foundation, which talks about giving -- don't know much about it, though.

If you work at a job and get paid a lot for it, it's society's way of telling you "we really wanted this job done, and you did it". If you can do a good job at a high-paying job, you may be doing good by building the economy. And then you can also give from your high salary. The jobs that you can get that pay the most are likely ones that use some or all of your talents.

Some jobs harm more people than they help, but most are beneficial at least by helping to build the economy. If you do your job well, you're providing more value for what people are paying you. Some of that value trickles up to your employer or their shareholders. But some of it "trickles out" to your customers or clients. Providing more benefit for the same price, or for a lower price, helps with domestic poverty, an issue which can distract from global poverty if unresolved.

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Out of whatever money you do earn, or have, you can give.

You can try the biblical tithe of giving 10% of what you earn or spend in a year. I've tried this, and have given to World Bible School, Oxfam, Modest Needs, GiveDirectly, and Homeless Empowerment through Art and Leadership-San Diego recently.

(Worldwide House Church has a list of charities you might find useful.)

If you can't give 10%, you can give less. Even a token amount, like $50 a year. (Which, if you multiply by the 100 million lowest-earning Americans comes out to $5 billion a year.) This helps tell yourself "I am the kind of person who gives", and if you ever end up with more money, you can give more.

30 July 2024: The founder of Modest Needs was accused of embezzling $2.5 million from the charity. According to these unofficial calculations, that added up to about 21% of revenue. I still think the idea of Modest Needs is good (giving emergency money to people to keep them from falling into worse poverty), but even good charity ideas can be implemented by dishonest people. Charities always involve overhead, so that if you give $100, maybe $20 to $30 will go to expenses, and only $70

or $80 will reach the people you're trying to reach. Corruption can be seen as "overhead" as well -- in other words, just because there is the chance that a charity is being embezzled from doesn't necessarily take away from the good that it does. It does good even though it is corrupt, more good the less corrupt it is. So, better to give to charities that aren't corrupt, but absolute perfectionism with charities means you can only give to people you know personally (where you, in effect, administer the money and incur overhead), which may limit your effectiveness.

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Another possible thing to pursue is art. Some artists have to live the life of Jesus. Most don't, don't attain that level of celebrity. (Or they do live the life of Jesus, but in relative obscurity.) Most never become popular.

Art is a burden. So if you have the burden, what do you do with it? One thing you can try to do is to make the best art you can. You can contribute to a scene. Your art can help change the background mood of the culture, and this change may reap big dividends in terms of people becoming more alive. One need that might need to be met is, what kind of art is helpful to people in adversity? Specifically, what kind of art can be helpful in ways that art doesn't do as well at in the current culture. I would say (in 2020), with a little bit of inaccuracy, that we're good at making music that helps you escape, or live through your feelings as a "small person", but not as much at making music that helps people get to work. A long time ago, marches were popular. That exact form may not work now (and the vibe of the "march-like" activity of that time period had problems, so it may be just as well), but what's something that's similarly invigorating, helping people work? That would be one aesthetic challenge. Others could involve trying to make music that helps people become holy. (Music just being one example.)

As an artist, you starve for money, but most essentially, you can starve for an audience. It is good to try to build scenes. If you can connect enough people to each other, the fact that you connected them probably predisposes them to take in your art. You can make art specifically in order to bring people together. (I've seen an art collective in Southern California try that, called "Just Tryna Make Friends".)

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You can also try to build scenes, even if you aren't an artist. You could try to be a traditional church planter, or you could try to connect unchurched Christians to each other, outside the traditional church. Or you can find a secular affinity with which to connect people.

I have more thoughts about Christian scenes, which I hope to remember to write about.

> 22 July 2021: One thing you can do as a church is sell your building and meet as a house church or network of house churches, and then give the money to people who need it more.

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You may be a thinker. Like art, being a thinker is a burden. So again, how can you use that? Maybe I shouldn't tell you how, because you can figure that out, as a thinker, and need to go your own way. It's important for there to be thinkers who put God first, who are also altruistic.

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You can try to build "friendship skills". There are some skills which people who are "really good friends" have. For instance, therapist, social worker, caregiver, teacher, life coach... To become a professional in any of these fields may be too much for you (or it may not be). If it is, then you may still benefit by learning some of the skills of some or all of these roles. Then you will be better equipped to handle the (fairly likely) event that you have to take these roles on in an informal way. If you are an older person with some experience in these areas, you can teach them.

The better your skills are, the more you can help your friends, or find new ones.

(Translating (for instance) "therapist skills that work in a therapy situation" to "therapist skills that work in a friendship situation" may require some thought and care.)

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"Friendship skills" has a natural continuity with "family skills", like parenting or being a child or sibling, and they can be approached in a similar way.

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In any role, developing your own trustworthiness is good, so that you are a reliable person. You can end up spending a long period of your life developing trustworthiness and self-trust, just to enable you to go out and be effective without betraying people. There's some danger in becoming self-focused in working on yourself. But there's value in desiring to be someone who is trustworthy, and sometimes working on that.

Trustworthiness has a big overlap with holiness. If you are truly holy, you will be trustworthy, at least in having pure intentions. If you are truly trustworthy, you direct people toward the goal of human development, which is to become holy, set apart to God. That will be your goal, and you

will have gone a certain way down that path. If your intentions are impure, you will betray someone.

Holiness in yourself is sometimes found by seeking it directly, but more often by seeking something outside yourself, by not being self- focused.

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You can pray. Prayer is a helpful element in all of the above, because God cares more about people than you do, and you are not God. God can help you care. In the end, the altruism that matters most is to connect people to God. So you should connect yourself to him.

Prayer is sometimes effective in ways that you can see. It's not likely that if you pray there will be a miraculous rain in a drought-stricken place, because of your prayer. But someone might be struck by the fact of drought and get involved in helping people in drought-stricken places because of prayer. (That's what I expect, as a contemporary person. I think it's possible that God does not, or cannot, act in the most obvious ways in our time. But it does seem that God is limited by our faith -- which I think means that if you choose to approach God, and God chooses to approach you, you may develop a relationship through which his power can flow into the world.)

Prayer can perform the impossible, like keeping you true to your calling.

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Scene building and friendship/family skill building work hand in hand and along with giving something to charity, and prayer, are things that just about any person can pursue to some extent. They support the work that more direct helpers do, in addressing issues around the world.

For instance, someone growing up in a culture where it's expected that you do something, and one thing you might do is work in the development industry, will go that way instead of into business or academia, which might have been the default paths. The scene is where the culture is, so someone has to build that scene. Or someone whose life is rough or undernourished might not make it into an altruistic career path for a long time, cutting back on their long-term effectiveness. But friendship skill-building can make it so that the people around them aren't as bad for them, or are more good for them, and they can cope or grow better themselves. Earn-to-give can fund charities or missions. Prayer supports a climate of trusting concern.

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One important thing that most or all of the above roles have some bearing on is dealing with long-term or future issues. Here are a few things to think about: AI (technological unemployment, or even transformative AI),

climate change. There are big problems like political / cultural polarization. Racism, sexism, and whatever other cultural problems. And there may be other things to add to the list.

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One thing I think is true about many lists is that they can be added to, and should not be seen as exhaustive. So if you think of something to try that's not on this list, it could be a good idea.

Labels: #altruism, #career, #Christianity, #holiness, #life choices, #longer, #mental health, #politics, #prayer, #psychology, #wisdom

News: 11 September 2020

%news-11-september-2020

Friday, September 11, 2020

In preparing Things to Do for release, I edited it over and over, figuring that I needed to get it right. I think that's a good attitude. So I went back and did minor edits on many of the things I've written this year (in all the posts that looked like they needed them, to me today). I am not always the best at bringing things to perfection or completion.

I'm thinking of doing some book reviews. One is of Thomas Moynihan's *X-Risk: How Humanity Discovered Its Own Extinction*. It doesn't come out until November. Another that I'm thinking of doing, maybe, is Sharon Hewitt Rawlette's *The Feeling of Value*.

Some which I'm less sure I'll do / may do further in the future, are Eliezer Yudkowsky's *Inadequate Equilibria* and Óscar Martínez's *A History of Violence*. Also on my "radar screen" is Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*.

Labels: #news and meta

Pen Pals

%pen-pals

Monday, September 14, 2020

I have always tended to like writing emails. But finding people to correspond with is sometimes difficult. My guess is that less than 25% of the people I've ever considered friends actually like writing emails.

However, there are websites to connect people who like to correspond by email or postal mail. I tried one called PenPal World, first in 2018 for a while, then again from the end of 2019 until maybe a month ago. I find myself going through phases with scenes. I have to get away from the scene for a while. So I'm taking a break from seeking out new pen pals. (And maybe not coincidentally, I feel less of an appetite to write emails.)

I have three pen pals from that. I had a number of not-so-bad penpalships that didn't last, and only one that was a little bad. I don't know how online dating compares, but it might be in the same ballpark in terms of the ratio of negative to positive to "fizzle" experiences.

You can find strange, often political or intellectual people on Twitter, and a similar bias toward the public and the performative in other social media sites. But PenPal World, and penpalling (I would guess), seems to attract quieter people.

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Update: 23 August 2023

Since writing the above, in 2021 and 2022, I used PenPal World. I feel like I should point out that pen pal sites often have bad reputations. People say "scammers and perverts" use them. (I had correspondence with someone who was probably a scammer, and someone who was probably a "pervert". Nothing really bad happened to me because of those people, but the risk is there). I think my experience overall was more positive than negative, but there is some risk. PenPal World may not be the best penpal site.

I used PenPal World somewhat seasonally (starting in winter and spring and taking a break in fall). I guess it's been about a year since I last used it and I think I still have one or two pen pals that I am not in touch with much but whom I could email. Sometimes after a seasonal activity, I come back, but other times I feel like I have moved on from that time in my life, and that is how I feel about pen pal sites now.

Labels: #note, #personal, #relationships, #seeking, #social connection

The Statue Guide

%the-statue-guide

Tuesday, September 15, 2020

There is a statue which was not made by a human being, which stands in the heart of a certain city. It is 500 feet (~166 m) high and can be seen from miles away.

A young boy saw that statue and saw the life in it. He wanted to go see it, and his parents took him once. He looked up at it from its feet and it didn't look quite the same to him. But he believed in it, and touched the statue's feet, polished by the touch of other citizens.

From then on, he knew that the statue was for him, and he went about his normal days as a young boy, not thinking too much of it.

He read the newspaper when he had nothing to do after school, and saw that there were blind people who had trouble finding the statue. People tried to give them very good directions, but it turns out that it's hard to give directions to blind people if you're sighted.

This weighed on him. He decided that he needed to learn how to make better directions for blind people to find the statue.

He forgot about this in the short run, but remembered it with his whole life. He found that while a sighted person only needed to be shown the statue from a distance, and told "just find a way to get through the streets -- you'll make it", a blind person had to be told to go from this street to that street -- the city has a lot of canyons cutting streets into pieces, so there's no one or two streets that can get you to the statue. And unfortunately, in this city there are blind people who can't even process the idea of a street and must be told precisely how many steps to take in which direction, orienting themselves to the sounds and smells along the way.

So he knew that what he must do was to become blind himself, and even damage his ability to process streets, in order to enter into the reality of the blind people he wanted to guide to the statue. So he let his eyesight dim, from reading old street maps, and learned to read Braille.

And he worked diligently, as a guide for the blind, proving from Braille maps exactly where the statue ought to be.

He had always been content, as when a boy, to let the statue be off in the distance, but one day he wished to see the statue, to believe in it. So he looked up the route to get from right where he was to the statue, and

carefully followed it, avoided getting hit by a car, avoided tripping on the cracks in the pavement.

And he arrived at where the statue ought to be, but he could not see it. Eventually someone led him to the foot of it, and he touched the foot. He could only believe that the rest of the statue was there.

Labels: #agnosticism, #altruism, #courage, #faith, #imagination, #parable, #seeking

Receptivity to Reality

%receptivity-to-reality

Tuesday, September 15, 2020

Fiducial utilitarianism talks about receptivity to enhancement, as a definition of "trust". Generally I like trust and trustworthiness. But it occurs to me that being "trust oriented" is not necessarily trustworthy. Being into what enhances you is not necessarily trustworthy. Instead, you can connect to a thing in itself.

One criticism of hedonism that a person could make is that it could lead to the following dialogue:

> "I love you."
>
> "You mean, I give you pleasure?"
>
> "Well, yeah! Duh!"

Which is a funny thing to say, kind of childish or childlike. (Or you could make the exchange be darker: "Yeah, you mean nothing more to me than the pleasure you give me.")

Happiness is an objective state of affairs, a state of good fortune. We judge that we are in a happy state, at times. And that makes us feel a certain way, what we call "feeling happy".

We might see the problem in only being into happy feelings. Then, we might further see the problem in only being into judgments that we are happy. We can see how these things deny objective reality. Why not just "wirehead", hack your brain so that you always have happy feelings or judgments?

Then, we might further see the problem in only being into happy states of affairs, good fortune for us, because good fortune for us through states of affairs makes the states of affairs be about us. We say "X gives me enhancement.", but the sentence that we could be saying is "X.". The concern for enhancement gets in the way of X, the thing itself.

So then we might want to replace or reform fiducial utilitarianism with a different utilitarianism, one which maximizes receptiveness to reality. Just as with receptivity to enhancement, this receptiveness is on multiple levels. Here's a provisional sketch of the levels of trust and receptivity to reality:

Do people really exist to each other?

I see a person X:

1. X has a body. --Okay, on that level they're real.

2. I can form a mental model of X's mind. --Good, I consider them a person.

3. X exists for me only relevant to the pain or pleasure they give to me. --No, on that level, all that exists to me is my pleasure or pain.

I think that receptivity to reality could be seen as true fiduciality, if we take fiduciality to mean "seek what is most trustworthy". (That's one of the meanings in the booklet about fiduciality.) True enhancement is to be free from the mental category of enhancement. So I may use "fiduciality" as a shorthand for "seeking receptivity to enhancement, which if most intense is receptivity to reality".

If I want to make this reform, does it threaten anything else I've written? I'm not sure right now about everything, but there are a few thoughts that come to mind:

I've supposed that "everything is trust", that that's what all conscious existence is. So then, people who are most real are those who trust the most, most truly, most deeply. And thus God trusts, and thus has to be receptive to enhancement from the realities of our pain, and from the disconnection from him which we experience. And thus God must in some way be separable from God (implying someone like Jesus). Does it matter if we remove the "enhancement" term from "God must be receptive to enhancement from the realities of our pain and our disconnection from God"? So instead, "God must be receptive to the realities of our pain and our disconnection from him"? That seems to give the same result, someone like Jesus.

It seems plausible that those who are most receptive to reality are those who are most real. Looking at it that way, it seems like "enhancement" is an extra term that gets in the way of a person connecting with reality. You could say that consciousness is always consciousness of something. So in order to be, you must be conscious of something (if at minimum just yourself). Being is being conscious of something. Personal being is being conscious of something in a personal way. So being is being receptive to reality, and to be real (to "be more" or "most be"), you have to be fully receptive to reality, as a person. This is parallel to what I've said before, that to be real is to be fully receptive to enhancement from reality, which

is to fully trust. Thus receptivity to reality can replace trust, as the basic material of reality which I would say everything is.

So, maybe this won't cause too many problems for me. Maybe it won't, or maybe it will.

It's pretty hard to not be enhancement-oriented. I'm reminded of Buber's I-You vs. I-It thinking. I-You sounds pretty good, but the way Buber defines it, it's kind of rare. I can see someone saying that I-It and enhancement-orientation are hardwired in us for survival. I don't really want to denigrate enhancement or enhancement-orientation. So I like creating a continuity between trustworthiness in terms of enhancement, on the one hand, and trustworthiness in terms of reality, on the other, emphasizing the overall unity of seeking enhancement and seeking reality by connecting them both to trustworthiness. The truest enhancement is to be freed from enhancement-orientation, and thus to just be receptive to reality. And thus I like, as above, continuing to consider receptivity to reality fused with the concept of fiducialism that I've already described.

Labels: #note, #ontology, #philosophy, #psychology, #trust

The Tongue as Organ of Sight

%the-tongue-as-organ-of-sight

Sunday, September 20, 2020

The tongue as an organ of perception. One meaning: taste and mouthfeel. Another: we speak reality to ourselves. So, to see things from the Spirit's perspective, and to speak as though God exists.

Humans are actors. When we say the lines, we become the character, and see things from the character's point of view.

Labels: #Christianity, #communication, #courage, #culture, #empathy, #fear, #hope, #note, #psychology, #relationships

Book Review Preview: The Feeling of Value by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette

%book-review-preview-feeling-of-value-by

Wednesday, September 23, 2020

See also the main review.

I got *The Feeling of Value*, by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette, in the mail yesterday. The subtitle is *Moral Realism Grounded in Phenomenal Consciousness*. It basically says "you know value/disvalue" (e.g. right/wrong) "through your direct experience of phenomena" or maybe it's more like "value/disvalue is in the experience itself" -- I'm not sure which yet. This leads her to defend a kind of hedonic utilitarianism. Her goal is to go against moral antirealism, and to support moral realism.

I plan to read it twice before reviewing. A philosophy professor I was acquainted with once said "read a book once, give it a light read" ("light read" is an interesting concept when applied to some philosophy books) "and then read it again more seriously". It's a good idea to take notes, at least on the second reading, I think. Also it can be better to understand the big picture before trying to make more detailed arguments.

I hope to compare Rawlette's approach to that of MSLN, especially legitimism and simantism. She may show me ways to make those accounts more specific/explicit/developed. I expect to be critical of her approach to ethics.

Here are some criticisms I have of hedonic utilitarianism which she may address:

1. How do we know what ought to give us pain or pleasure?

    a. This is relevant when thinking about artificial superintelligence (ASI). An ASI programmed to be a hedonist might want to change human nature so that it is trivially easy to cause us pleasure, and to avoid giving us pain. We would say "No, I don't want to be a blob of pleasure", but why not be one?

There's some risk (similar or essentially the same as what a past version of me said here) that we find pleasure easy to consent to, and the removal of pain, so there's an incentive for civilization (including ASI) to drift in the direction of giving us more and more pleasure, less and less pain, until we have gradually simplified ourselves into blobs of pleasure. I think hedonism is not just an explicit philosophical position, but also a powerful psychological tendency.

Some people might bite the bullet and say "No, being a blob of pleasure sounds good to me". Who can say what's wrong or right? If it feels good, it's good. But what if God disagrees? You might look at your child and hope that they don't get hooked on heroin. Technically, they're happy when they're on heroin. Maybe technically we're happy when we're living painless, rich, godless lives, or when we are blobs of pleasure. But God might disagree.

b. Another point of relevance is when people construct scripts of what a life is supposed to be. When a life event is "bad" then "you are in a pity-worthy, deplorable state" -- the script wants you to feel depressed. Should you feel depressed? Maybe the script comes from other people, and is there to discourage you from doing things that are unpopular.

2. What about other goods that aren't captured well by hedonism?

a. Pleasure could be bad, if it takes us away from God, or some other reality. In an upcoming short story about the future of beauty, that I plan to release relatively soon, you may see a tension between deeper good and surface good. It may take some pain to have deeper good, and unbroken pleasure may prevent things like coming to value people apart from how they or their life realities give a person pleasure.

b. Pain could be good. Two more easily dismissed examples of this are found in the concept of purgatory (pain, in itself, purges us of sin or the guilt of sin) and the phrase "pain is weakness leaving the body". (Dismissed because you could say "what you really want is improved strength, or heaven, in the end, and both those states are basically pleasurable.") A less easily dismissed example is found when we ask "what if God doesn't care if we suffer, as long as we can bear it and connect with reality?" In other words, what if there is pain in heaven after all -- our real reward is God himself, not the pleasure or freedom from pain he might be able to give us? The pain is good because it is real, and experiencing it is part of being receptive to reality. An overall receptiveness to reality (perhaps) is the only way to really connect with God.

c. I am adding this section in later in the editing process, and don't want to make this point long so that it gives me yet more to edit, but basically I can mention fiducialism as a replacement for hedonism.

3. Why should we think that "ought" has anything to do with our feelings, or even our judgments?

a. Maybe "ought" is more like "I want something to be a certain way (if it's not that way), or that want is satisfied by that thing being that certain way (if it is), and that exact wanting is something that deserves to be true". (I suspect that it's hard to define "deserves" without basically using "ought" -- circularity. Maybe "ought" is a primitive of language and psychology?) Someone who ought to be able to define things is the one who can define things, and can say "pain is not necessarily bad, and pleasure is not necessarily good". The athlete who says "pain is weakness leaving the body", or the believer who says "I will accept this bitter

cup" are basically exercising their ability to claim that some thing ought to be. To say that something that is, ought to be, is something that in a sense no one can argue with. But maybe some persons can even say that what is ought not to be? So in this way, good and bad come out of our taste, more so than out of our pure experience. (Out of opinion rather than feeling.) Maybe pain biases us to call it bad. But we don't have to -- we can see through that sometimes.

b. It could be that it seems like hedonism is a real view of things, that pleasure ought to be and pain ought not to be, because these are popular judgments. (One way to cash out the popular defining of human well-being.) (You could also say that this is why preferentialism seems to be a real view, because of course everyone likes preferences.) These might seem to be real things, because of our humanism. But why should real "ought" have anything to do with human judgments? You could say that human judgments do have something to do with it, if what we're exploring is "our strongest moral convictions" rather than something outside that. (Rawlette, p. 3: "The version of realism I present actually provides a robust metaethical justification for many of our strongest moral convictions."). But what do our strongest moral convictions have to do with real "ought"? If there is a God (in this case, in the sense of a most-authoritative being), then we might hope to be in line with his preferences, or perhaps rather with his *truth*, which is similar to preference but which is unlike ours for some kind of lack of "falsehood" (we call both self-justifiying explanations and lies "B.S.") or lack of partiality. If there is no God, then how are "our strongest moral convictions" anything other than "what is popular in a certain way"? (I mean this both as a rhetorical and a real question, if that makes sense.) And then I'm not sure that Rawlette's project is really realist after all. Her ultimate criterion is (may be? not sure yet) "our strongest moral convictions", not any

objective truth. In other words, realism is supposedly about some grounding in reality through an argument of justification, while antirealism doesn't bother with that. "Our strongest moral convictions" sounds like the same criterion moral antirealists would use. Why not just observe the criterion, rather than adding some conceptual layer, some kind of logical justification? Unless, what we are doing (with both realist and antirealist ethics) is bending the criterion, democratically, by presenting an argument that sounds (and in a sense, is) logical, and is thus persuasive in shifting "our strongest moral convictions"? If you want to change other people's values to be like yours, you use logic, even if the real foundation of values is just values -- we can be dazzled by logic.

Or maybe she really could be a moral realist (the appeal to strongest moral convictions doesn't rule that out), one who just says "our strongest moral convictions are real and we should act on them", as opposed to the antirealist, who says "our strongest moral convictions are fictions and we should act on them". (I think I do not yet understand moral realism vs. antirealism, especially moral antirealism, and hope the book will help me understand.) Can you act on something as much as you should if you don't feel it is real? Maybe that's the essence of Rawlette's project, to say "No, so since we know we ought to act on certain things, we need to figure out a way to see them as real". I know that there is a kind of quixotic task that philosophers take up (and scientists, I think), which is the search for truth but which is actually really wanting something to be true and figuring out a way to find out that it is true (if possible). If it's true that we just know that certain things are good, and we have to change our perspective on reality so as to fully pursue those goods, then maybe reality is most deeply known not by whatever science or philosophy says, but in those things we know we have to think are good, and

have to pursue as good. We want things to be true, but in a way, that could be that they just are true.

Or maybe Rawlette would be willing to say "No, those deep things aren't true since they don't line up with philosophy" -- philosophy is the real authority after all -- but doesn't happen to have to say that because of the book she wrote, showing how they do line up.

(If "our strongest moral convictions" can be modified with rhetorical or logical force, then does it become "what is right is what psychologically strong, motivated people reprogram people to see as right"? -- something that the coming powers of AI and genetic engineering can intensify. So then such convictions might not be some kind of immutable standard.)

One could say that the deep things, and hedonic utilitarianism, are two different aspects of the same being, the latter being the former's expression in the world of ethical philosophy. That doesn't feel intuitively correct to me, though. I could see maybe fiducial utilitarianism getting closer to that function than hedonic utilitarianism, but even that doesn't feel right. Maybe because ethical philosophy itself is a such a strange shard.

Still, we are left with "should it be true that deep human convictions are reliable judges or creators of 'ought'?" -- a philosophical question. And philosophy, as a whole, the general pursuit, has some grounding in deep human convictions, comes from the outworking of them. We might wonder if philosophy suggests that we should consider God's point of view, either that God shares our convictions, or that his differ from ours and that we should align ourselves with his -- in other words, it's ultimately his convictions

as the founder of reality (or as most-authoritative for some other reason than founding things) that are truth, while ours are feelings or opinions.

c. I mentioned "truth" in the previous section. We might say that truth is inherently something that is indifferent to popularity. In fact, Rawlette's project is to use truth to change people's minds (fellow philosophers who are moral antirealists, for instance). So why shouldn't "ought" be indifferent to popularity as well? Ought could be a form of truth.

d. Some of the above might boil down to: "we want truth, independent of popularity -- does it come from God, or from qualia?" I would want to defend "God", and Rawlette "qualia" or something in the neighborhood of "qualia". I would say "if ought is -- and I think it has to be -- then it is an opinion", while Rawlette might say "if ought is, then it is a feeling" -- not "we know it through feelings", because then what is it in itself if not an opinion? (Mostly not a rhetorical question.)

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One thing I am thinking of addressing in the review (maybe more than I am about to here), is the question of "What does this matter?" Certainly the truth matters in itself. But how much money can we devote to understanding the truth? Is there a way that an altruist could benefit from a book like Rawlette's?

As an (amateur) philosopher myself, I share the dilemma of Rawlette (as I currently guess it to be, not having yet read her book). I want to get some truth that makes a difference in the world. But the expression of that truth, in the way I know how to express it, is only going to be heard by philosophically-inclined people -- maybe not a lot of them, only some of whom will change what they do as a result. A project like Rawlette's (which, I see from p. 1, involves the term "motivational structure", a term I also use) might hope to get people to feel and thus behave differently -- maybe causing a release of cultural energy to cause more work or more deeply felt caring (or the metaphor might be one of putting people to work to build up cultural structures and institutions of caring). But are philosophers or the philosophically-inclined the right people to try to motivate to care more and work harder? Or is it better to speak to people

in general, there being so many more of them?

Francis Schaeffer was disheartened at how philosophy trickled down to the masses. But to me it seems like philosophy may not have much potential to undo the undermining of moral realism (part of what Schaeffer lamented) through the same process. That is, it doesn't seem as clear to me that philosophy trickles down to the average person, the way it used to in Schaeffer's day. I hope to be proved (or help prove myself) wrong some day, in some way, but it seems to me that the default assumption is that philosophy is a game for philosophers, and few others pay attention. Schaeffer thought that the artists could communicate philosophy-derived truths, but it seems to me that most artists are either roughly as obscure as philosophers, or not concerned with philosophy themselves. And what can art do that is fresh? Where are the new philosophies that are different from all the old ones that have already influenced art? Again, I can hope that somehow I could find or create ideas or approaches to things that are fresh, in some way, which inspire artists (or myself) to create philosophically-informed art. But my default assumption remains that philosophy doesn't affect the average person, that there isn't a trickling-down through art into the average person's culture.

(Maybe a counterpoint is: nihilism as evinced in recent TV.)

While I might hope to someday, somehow, reach average people with philosophically-derived ideas or spirits, I can see right now a group of people who take philosophy seriously, and perhaps would take Rawlette's philosophy seriously, who put philosophy into action, or at least generally aspire to. These are the effective altruists (EAs). Would effective altruists be the kind of people who need to be motivated to work harder and care more? Maybe some of them? There's a term they use: "value drift", the way that a person's priorities change and they no longer work as hard for the cause, save as much money to give, etc. Could something like Rawlette's philosophy, a bolsterer of motivational structure, be something that could prevent value drift in some individuals? It sounds plausible. The effective altruists are already aware of the possibility of being moral realists. (Many of them already are.) Maybe her book would cause some of those who are moral antirealists to become moral realists, causing them to stick with their first love.

Would it be possible to cause people on the margins of effective altruist ideology to shift into being effective altruists, or EA-aligned? For instance, a moral antirealist might think "Yeah, giving money to help people is good... I should do that... but, then, morality is kind of a social construct, right? Yeah, whatever." and not do it. This person being driven by self-interest and logic, if they had better beliefs, they might say "Giving money to help people is good... and what is good really is good... I should do that..." and do it. A very self-interested person might shy away from accepting what Rawlette said in the first place, or use some kind of self-

deception in order to both hold Rawlette's views and not act on them. They would not be on the margin of EA-aligned behavior. But there might be a lot of people who are on the margin, who can be philosophically literate, or are as much as EAs are, who just haven't heard of Rawlette's argument. They might even have heard the EAs' pitch (Singer's Drowning Child Argument, perhaps), and yet vitiated it with moral antirealism. But an effective argument for moral realism might make a difference. One would think that EAs would be looking for new ideologies to prevent value drift and aid in recruiting people from social spaces adjacent to them. From a few months' reading of the EA Forum, I don't get the impression that this is something they seriously pursue to a great extent. (I might be wrong -- but something that was a particularly burning issue, I wouldn't have missed.) This might be because they know better than to be into ideology (it's something they're past, as individuals, and something they don't expect enough people to really be changed by), or it might be that many EAs are not really into human resource questions, and this is essentially a human resource question -- or some other reason.

I remember a philosophy professor saying something like "people aren't bad, it's just that the system is bad". So maybe Rawlette can't do much good, since everyone is already moral and good, and we're just in horribly ill-coordinated systems. I hope to discuss this in the future at some point, show a way that if you really care, you can do something about systemic problems, so as to provide benefit from improved motivational structures. (This already has some other ideas that might apply.) I have (and I think Rawlette may possibly also have) the sense that it is required of us to do what is best, not just a socially-acceptable half-effort. It is wrong of us to not be heroes or "anointed ones", at whatever scale we can and should be. Perhaps that is a message which could resonate with the average person. In other words, with the right support beliefs and ideas, Rawlette's may be able to function as one might intend them to.

One thing I don't know from not having read Rawlette's book yet is how possible it is to convert her book into a form which can be adopted by people who don't read academic philosophy.

Labels: #altruism, #book review, #culture, #Francis Schaeffer, #God, #life choices, #longer, #morality, #ontology, #philosophy, #psychology, #seriousness, #Sharon Hewitt Rawlette

The Audience Makes a Book

%the-audience-makes-book

Friday, September 25, 2020

It's true that authors write their books, but it's the audience who "makes" a book.

In other words, a lot of the power of a book comes from the fact that it has been recommended by a lot of people. A book is by default just the point of view of one person. It means something different if it corresponds with the desires, judgments, or experiences of lots of people -- they have affirmed its truth from their perspectives.

Labels: #communication, #culture, #glory, #note

Seeing Potential

%seeing-potential

Friday, September 25, 2020

People can seem like they don't have potential, or aren't real people. But then you see them in the context where they are most truly themselves (e.g., singing a song they wrote). And then you see how they are deep and worth paying attention to.

It's as though the role society wants everyone to inhabit is that of the "typical" person. No dreams, no depth. But people can escape that role by doing what they love.

A parallel to Gell-Mann Amnesia. People are spun to us according to society's narrative (they spin themselves by adopting the roles we elicit.) We sometimes see people's reality, then when the moment is past, we forget.

Labels: #culture, #faith, #formulalessness, #formulas, #hope, #idealization, #imagination, #listening, #note, #personal, #psychology, #relationships

Informing Love

%informing-love

Saturday, September 26, 2020

If you want to persuade someone of something, it may be more effective to love them than to present an argument (or to argue with them). Knowledge is *justified* true *belief*. What you do on the justification side does not change someone's mind if there is some sort of obstacle on the belief side.

Belief is a form of trust. So lack of trust is a deficiency that can prevent belief. Trust is difficult sometimes: is dependent on physical, intellectual, emotional factors, and a person's life history. A person can't deeply listen to what they don't trust, and can't even understand some concepts that they don't trust. How can a person believe a truth that is foreign to them? Something has to act on them to open them up to what they were closed to, for them to trust. And love overcomes many difficulties in trusting propositions. Why wouldn't you trust someone who, from your perspective, has your best interests at heart, and effectively pursues them? Someone who delights in you and bears with you? How could you resist getting drawn into their current?

Having said that, love could now sound like a sinister thing, a way to have power over people and suck them into the way of life you personally prefer, to narrow their horizons to whatever you happen to prefer. And while it doesn't have to be used that way, it can be, and even if we are innocent of that design, it's worth asking "If I become so good at loving, so genuine in loving people, what kind of truth am I leading them into? What kind of path is it that I follow?"

Apologetics is traditionally thought of as a way to persuade "infidels", or perhaps less acknowledged is the motive and effect of shoring up the faith of believers who have inquiring minds. However, apologetics could also be seen as the pursuit of informing love, so that love does not keep its beloveds in a house that is ultimately untrustworthy.

Labels: #agnosticism, #altruism, #love, #note, #philosophy, #power, #psychology, #rationality, #relationships, #trust

Reading List Preview: Population Ethics

%reading-list-preview-population-ethics

Monday, September 28, 2020

Finished review of reading list here.

One interesting topic is population ethics. Ethics can talk about the question of "how to make a given existing population most well-off?" Maybe you have 100 people in your population who are very happy. Now consider, should one of you have a baby, and extend the group's size to 101? Will that new baby live a good life? If it's good enough, then you will probably say, "sure, why not?" It seems prima facie good to have one more person exist, if its life will go well. That's population ethics, asking the question of whether there should be more (or the same amount of, or fewer) people, morally speaking.

Intuitively, I tend to want to say "if we have 10 billion people on Earth, that's plenty, let's just stop there and be content with that number of people, and make things sustainable and actually good for everyone". Actually, I'd be content if there were only 1 billion people, if we got to that level of population through a well-managed demographic transition (as opposed to war, plague, famine, etc.) Maybe, whatever population level there is is fine with me. But I wouldn't be as fine with the people who do live not living lives full of true well-being.

Both intuitions, of expansion and contentment, make sense to me. And they go against each other.

So I want to do some readings about population ethics. Here is a reading list from the EA Forum. I may read through it all and write up my thoughts.

Since these are philosophy papers, I think I'll try to repeat the technique mentioned here: read twice, the first time a "light read", the second time more seriously.

I've read part of the first, Population Axiology, paper. Here are some questions and thoughts, going into this:

> 1. Is there a rational way to decide how large a population should be? If not, then we are in a situation where we have to decide without a right answer.

2. Questions of moral philosophies affecting population-ethical views:

a. Hedonism lends itself to having more and more. Preferentialism can lend itself to that but also can lend itself to saying "everybody got what they wanted, so we don't need any more." With preferentialism, there's a question of "what should people prefer?" The answer to that might answer the question "should we want more and more, or should we be content?" Or we could say that there's no good or bad preferences. Then we wonder what random preferences humans might have, and how they might tilt toward more or fewer people.

b. What about fiducialism? Is fiducialism a "more and more" thing ("adventure", as in the *Fiducialism* booklet), or inherently about connecting with what is ("mission", or "receptivity to reality")? "Mission" is itself about the reality of people. This lends itself to saying "connect with the reality of existing people". But then, couldn't it lend itself to saying "there ought to be more people", to whose reality one could connect? So that's a hole in fiducialism to try to fill.

c. What do people mean to us? Are they to be seen economically, or in some other way? And given the answers to those questions, how strict should we be in making ourselves live according to economic thinking?

There's some ambiguity as to whether we regard people as wealth or as something else. If people are merely wealth, then we can be content to have less than maximal wealth. But if it's altruistic for the sake of other people to bring them into existence, then we are morally compelled to create them. (Or is

there another way to look at people, other than "wealth" and "beings (or prospective beings) to whom one has moral responsibility"?)

It may be more humane to look at people in a non-economic way. Even if in some economic sense (utilitarian, for instance), they would be better off if we were in the economic mode, to really see people as people requires us to leave that mode, and thus to sacrifice some of our do-gooding. This could shift our intuitions away from "maximize the number of superhappy people", make it less obviously a good thing to pursue.

3. What might population ethics look like given the God of MSLN?

a. God had some reason for creating people in the first place (unless there is no reason). Does this mean that in absence of a defeater, he will never stop creating people?

b. Would God value having more and more for its own sake? Is God a slave to maximization?

Interesting question: what is maximization? Is it some "thing" that demands that we do certain things? Or, as a reification, is it merely whatever it cashes out to? In other words, is it that maximization says "I demand that everyone have the best life possible", or is maximization simply our response to the reality of a set of existing people and what kinds of lives they could have?

c. Are people created new, or is there a fixed

supply of people created once and for all at the beginning of time, which God then brings into consciousness during their time in history?

> Possible answer: We are called to enter God's rest, and presumably God seeks rest, too. New people have to work out their salvation, which is not restful for God. So it seems like there is some finite limit to population, so that there can be a time of permanent rest afterward.
>
> If so, maybe if we increase population above baseline, what we're doing is accelerating the end of the world.
>
> Or, if God can handle our turmoil forever, he can create people forever. If he thinks there aren't enough people, he can always create more. Ultimately, it's his decision how many people there are, because he pays the biggest price for human experience and ultimately has power over the way things are. So if we create more people, he may cause fewer to be created elsewhere.

Labels: #altruism, #book review, #economics, #formulalessness, #formulas, #futurism, #longer, #morality, #philosophy, #victory

Outside Your Life Story

%outside-your-life-story

Tuesday, September 29, 2020

One way to live is to see things in terms of your own life story, your own lived life, and the lived lives of people you know. How will you pay your bills? How will you make it through your old age? How will you be a good friend? How can you present yourself to people without being shamed? How will you fit in? -- everyone else is just living their life stories.

Another way to live is to see that there is something outside your life story, and the life story of anyone you know, which is real whether you acknowledge it or not.

Labels: #altruism, #Christianity, #culture, #God, #listening, #note

Trading Unkindnesses

%trading-unkindnesses

Wednesday, September 30, 2020

What is true, apart from popularity, can be unkind to you. But in some ways, it can be kinder than popularity.

Labels: #culture, #mental health, #mental strength, #note, #philosophy, #social connection

News: 2 October 2020

%news-2-october-2020

Friday, October 2, 2020

A while ago I had a Twitter account that was both for writing and personal. I wanted to split it into two, one for writing, one personal. I did, and the writing one got suspended, probably because it was too sparse and may have looked like a spam account or something like that. I appealed the suspension, and recently (a few weeks ago), Twitter unsuspended the account. So now I have a writing Twitter account.

I don't really like Twitter that much anymore and don't expect to invest a lot in the account unless someday it has more followers. So far it's just for announcements.

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I started two reading projects, as you may have seen: reviewing Rawlette's *The Feeling of Value* and going through a reading list on population ethics from the EA Forum.

I probably shouldn't start any more projects right now. I do have Moynihan's *X-Risk* pre-ordered, should get that in early November. I might be able to finish the reading projects I've started before then (we'll see). If so, I may have a gap where I can consider starting another project. I think I may get through *X-Risk* quickly, maybe read it concurrent with something else.

Two philosophy projects occur to me. One is re-reading *I and Thou* by Buber and *Totality and Infinity* by Levinas: a showdown between two different theories of intersubjectivity. I like the toughness of Levinas, but I generally think that Buber is saner. At least, that's based on a couple of maybe-adequate readings of Buber and one not-so-good reading of Levinas. (I will definitely look into secondary literature if I try this project.) Can I come up with a take on intersubjectivity that is in keeping with my existing project?

The other is to read Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*. I have read about Berkeley and assimilated some of his ideas, but have never actually read anything by him. I expect to get some unexpected ideas, likely enough. But also I expect to be interested in his attempt to be skeptical of material substance.

Also I saw an Emily Dickinson poem that I liked, and may check out her work.

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The philosophy projects sound kind of heavy. I'm conscious that getting committed to something heavy might be a waste of my time. Maybe I'm better off doing a lot of light work, rather than a few heavy projects. Rawlette isn't too bad -- clearly-written book, and the ideas are fairly straightforward, so far. But the other three philosophers mentioned wouldn't be like her.

Labels: #news and meta

Broken and Stuck

%broken-and-stuck

Saturday, October 3, 2020

I used to have a cassette player when I was younger, maybe a little fancy, that had different modes. It could play in reverse, but there were other modes as well. It's been a while since I had it, so I don't remember specifically what they did. I do remember that there were some switches that, after many years of use (or abuse), were either broken, so you could move them without changing anything, or they were jammed to one setting, I can't remember which -- either way, you couldn't affect the cassette player on that dimension. The cassette player was broken and stuck.

Sometimes things become less stable when they're broken. But other times, being broken makes you more stable, by making you stuck. Maturity is (in part) a process of becoming more stable. But it may come through being broken. There can be an emotional meaning to "broken", a sense of being messed-up. But there's also a functional sense. Things just don't work the way they used to.

When do you need to be right? When you have something valuable to say. Nobody is right about everything, but if you're in an environment where people are trying to shut you up, and will use your mistakes as reason to discount you as a voice, overall, and you have something valuable to say, you had better act like you're right about everything. So you gravitate toward being stuck.

Can you forgive people? You need to be on your own side, if you're in an environment where people are trying to shut you up. You can forgive people on some levels. But like the word "listen", there's a stronger and weaker version of the term "forgive". To listen to someone is to really take into account what they're saying, which in some contexts is to act in accordance with what they say, not just be able to make sense of the words they say. To forgive someone can mean, in its stronger form, "to enter into a relationship as close as or closer than the one that was lost". If you do that, there is no doubt that you have forgiven someone. Do all relationships need to be restored? Maybe not. But if there is a good reason to restore a relationship, can you do that? Or are you stuck, unable to let go of your threatenedness?

Can you deal with your own contradictions? In the old days, we would have called these hypocrisies. Being a hypocrite is too much fun for our days. Nowadays, we are self-contradictory, holding contradictory views,

and not living out the views we have, out of fatigue and brokenness. We want to move the switch that makes us turn toward consistency, but as it's broken, it moves too easily, disconnected from the mechanism that really changes us on the inside.

Can you convert to a religion or worldview -- to any religion, or any worldview? Can you see things as being true that you didn't see as being true before? On what level? Can you deeply change as a person, even if it is merely to acknowledge the facts? If your will and intellect can't affect the rest of you, because the switches are broken or stuck, then it is not so easy.

Can you hold to a religion or worldview? You may try to stay in tune with your religion / worldview, by repeatedly moving the switches back to "ADHERING". But if the switch is broken, you may not really adhere, no matter how often you get the switch in the right place.

You can feel stuckness in your brain, a physical sense of rigidity. And the broken switches can be felt. For some people, just recognizing that there are these problems can help to fix them.

Labels: #listening, #mental health, #note, #personal, #power, #psychology, #rationality, #relationships, #religion

Knowing and Seeking to Know

%knowing-and-seeking-to-know

Sunday, October 4, 2020

If you are really open-minded, people can scam you. And you may not be able to commit to what really needs to be done.

But if you close your mind in order to be effective, you participate in another evil, not being aligned with reality.

It's a hard balance. But you can certainly aspire to both know, and seek to know.

Labels: #agnosticism, #altruism, #epistemology, #listening, #note, #philosophy, #rationality, #trust

Work For Treasure

%work-for-treasure

Monday, October 5, 2020

We have a tendency to treasure the things we work for. As an experiment, you can try this and see if it's true for you. Pick something you don't care about, then work to preserve it. You may find yourself caring about it. I have found this to be the case for me with house flies and with computer game monsters.

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also". It is when we are doing the work to secure our treasures, or when we spend time in the presence of our treasures, that we live real life.

Labels: #altruism, #desire, #empathy, #love, #psychology, #seeking

Mental Health and Holiness

%mental-health-and-holiness

Tuesday, October 6, 2020

A lot of times, when you do something wrong, it's because you're crazy, not because you're sinning. You operate from a place of poverty when you're crazy, but from a place of wealth when you're sinning. Sometimes people use the place of wealth as a way to mask their sense of poverty -- I'm not sure what to think there.

Does God care only about your intent, or also about your actions themselves? I think both can go against his preferences. So while you may have been crazy when you did something desperate to someone else, which harmed them, if you don't do anything about being crazy, maybe that is a problem of intent, since you may not have regard for God's feelings (nor the human victim's).

There's a connection between mental health and holiness. Holiness involves mental health. But mental health by itself does not cause you to be or become holy, to love God or set yourself apart for him.

There's a lot out there about mental health, by qualified people. I think it's important to add to what they say a concern with integrating God into your mental health practices, so that they do not become purely humanistic.

For instance, practicing journaling can be a way to understand how your life works, so that you can make interventions to reduce mental problems. You might want to evaluate different areas of your life, to see what situation you are in. One of those areas can, or should, involve God. So you might say, "What's the situation? in financial, mental, physical health, in my relationships with humans, with God". You are interested not only in mental health, but in your whole life.

By talking about what they talk about, and not about what they don't, thought patterns can imply that there is this, that, and no other thing, though they don't rule those other things out explicitly. Something to avoid is a vision of life that doesn't include God, explicitly or implicitly. Perhaps it is good to bring God's existence to mind whenever you try to use some sort of therapeutic technique on yourself, or whenever you visit a therapist. This technique of remembering God can be applied to other pursuits, such as thinking. (Thinking in partnership with God can itself be therapeutic.)

We find our treasure in what we work for, and our life of securing what

we treasure becomes our real life. So if we do not make our pursuit of mental health theistic in some way, we will fail to develop our connection with God in that part that seems so real to us. We treasure our well-being -- and what else?

Labels: #God, #holiness, #humanism, #mental health, #note, #psychology

Change of the World and Love of God

%change-of-world-and-love-of-god

Sunday, October 11, 2020

"It needs to change", we might say or embody. But the world can't change forever. Someday it must reach a really good state.

Complacency is a bad in itself. Being complacent is being closed on a deep level. So how can we stay open?

Should we love the world? That may mean that we love the status quo. Both the good and the bad come from the status quo. Sometimes you can separate the bad from the good, but the default assumption is that it's a package deal. A system is one thing, is what it is with all its parts. So if we love any one existing thing, maybe we have to keep the status quo. If we love (or "love") any one thing enough, we can't risk changing the system, at the risk of losing that thing. Does this mean that people who want to see change can't love? Can't trust?

Perhaps this is why the world is so messed up (in part). People can't sustain "it needs to change". They crave to love, can't refrain from loving, though refraining might make things better in the long run. Maybe to make things better, you need to hate some specific thing. Hate evil -- but then, hate can be evil, and is definitely unbearable in the end, a maintaining of lack of trust. So the hate that brings about good comes intermittently. And refraining from love is hard to sustain as well.

I think it's good to say "this world is not all there is", which is akin to "this world as it is not as it should be". Both say "the world, everything that adds up to my own satisfactions, my own wealth, is insufficient."

God exists outside this world. The love we have for God is not the love we have for the world, the love for all the gifts that give us satisfaction and security. We can love and trust God, and thus take weight off of seeing the world as it is as a good thing, which we might feel is necessary to keep from cutting ourselves off from loving and trusting as activities that are good for us.

Hate and alienation are akin. We are sometimes alien in ways that are natural and familiar to us. But God's alienness is not our alienness. God is a father (a familiar image), but also an alien. To love an alien as its child requires that you become an alien yourself.

Labels: #courage, #culture, #God, #hope, #leftism, #liberalism, #love, #note, #psychology, #trust

Scenes

%scenes

Monday, October 19, 2020

What is a scene?

Take for example an open mic scene. It might start with one cafe having an open mic night one night a week. It's fairly successful, and some of the people who attend would be willing to go to another open mic night on a different night. So another cafe nearby starts having an open mic night on a different night of the week.

If you go to one open mic, people there will talk about the other. The best way to find out about open mics is to go to one and hear from people where the others are. (In my experience, online directories of open mics exist, but are poorly maintained / tend to be out of date -- that's been true of San Diego, at least.)

Cafe 1 generally does not (or even could not) cause Cafe 2 to start their open mic, and similarly has limited ability to shut down Cafe 2's open mic.

Venues are quiet but important elements of scenes. You can have an open mic in a cafe, at a beach, in a park, a student union -- but you have to have it somewhere. And each venue has some influence over what kind of open mic can be done there. If a venue is no longer available (like a cafe goes out of business), then that disrupts the scene. An open mic can move to a different venue, but people might not follow.

Someone in the open mic scene might decide to put on a house show that is mostly attended by people from the scene, a one-off event. This isn't strictly speaking an open mic, but it's still part of the same scene.

When I was attending UC Davis, there was a monthly open mic that was led by a group of people, some students who were poets. I don't know how organized their group was, but at least they always performed a group poem at the start of the open mic nights -- they had to coordinate at least a little in that. (So, an organization can put on regular events.)

There weren't a lot of other open mics in Davis at that time, but that particular open mic generated its own small scene. I was part of a collaboration that came out of the open mic, made a song with two other artists connected through the scene. The collaboration was not caused by the open mic organizers as such, was something independent that "arose emergently" from the open mic.

A church is more like an organism, while a scene is more like a space or

matrix that contains organisms. But like the Davis open mic, a church itself functions as a scene, to some extent.

A scene can contain sub-scenes. For instance, the universal church is not a single organization, but rather is a scene. But within the universal church is "the set of churches or other Christian social phenomena in San Diego County". I can't very practically interact with Christian in-person things in Los Angeles (speaking as a San Diegan), so the LA scene is mostly not directly relevant to me. But it's certainly possible for me to hear about another church in San Diego, to leave whichever one I might be attending and go to it. It's certainly possible for me to say "I'm going to go see what they have in LA" and visit, and then find a church there. Or happen to hear of an LA church from someone in San Diego, maybe someone who moved here for a job and left a church they liked. But it's less likely than getting caught up in what's happening in San Diego County.

(God's perspective on the universal church is that it is the body of Christ -- not that it is merely a scene. A body has a deep kinship and claim (whether manifested or not) to being one interconnected thing. But scenes do not, not necessarily. (The cells in a body differ though most of them share the same DNA. A diseased body could be like a poorly-connected scene.))

Scenes have definitions to them, loose as they are. The open mic scene is made up of open mics, and the people who meet each other through open mics. A Christian scene is made up of Christians, and the people who meet each other through the elements of the Christian scene. In a sense, an open mic is part of one great scene, for instance, the social life of San Diego or even the United States or the world. The boundaries of scenes are fuzzy and can be continuous with other scenes, both broader and less definite ones (San Diego's open mic scene could be continuous with the overall social life of San Diego) or narrower, more definite ones (and it could be continuous with the local drum circle scene). If you are at an open mic, you are definitely participating in the open mic scene. If you are at a house show and everyone there is from the open mic scene and they all met each other through the open mic scene, then you are part of the open mic scene. But if there start to be non-open mic people at events, perhaps at some level of non-open mic person attendance, they aren't really open mic scene events.

A focal point (sometimes referred to as a "Schelling point") is a solution that people tend to choose by default in the absence of information (according to Wikipedia). This is relevant when trying to coordinate people's actions. Maybe someone explicitly sets up a focal point (informs people), but once this is done, it just "floats" in the culture -- maybe is hard to undo. Scenes involve focal points, perhaps more so than organizations, because they don't provide explicit direction to coordinate people.

An important basic focal point is "I'm going to go there [to a particular event or venue] because other people go there." I go "there" because I think explicitly "there are going to be people there". But I also go "there" because I am in the habit of going there. I rely on the habitual nature of others to feel like there is a "there" (socially speaking, a populated space) to go to.

Something that is in the neighborhood of a focal point is the "spirit" of a scene. A spirit is an animating breath, something with both a power and a quality to it. Somewhat like a fuel: wood burns differently than natural gas. Some spirits are contagious, and can be caught within an organization or scene. The metaphor of a fire: the coal can burn outside the fire, but burns out much sooner than if it were among fellow coals in the fire. Spirits are a third reason (besides habit and rational anticipation), that people decide to show up to (or find themselves showing up to) specific events or group meetings within a scene.

The definition of a scene selects a certain kind of person to be a participant in it (for instance, the extent to which the label "Christian" is taken up by a certain kind of person who then seeks the Christian scene). Due to this, and other habits, expectations, and spirits, people within a scene behave a certain way toward each other. Scenes shape individuals in (hopefully) congruent ways, so that the individual-to-individual interactions (those farthest from conscious organization) are still affected by the fact of being within the scene as a whole.

Are scenes really spaces where impersonal forces emergently generate social interaction and culture? In a sense, no. Each thing is caused by a consciousness. A consciousness that causes has preferences and will, and in that at least minimal sense is a person. So somebody causes each thing, including the basic actions occurring in a scene. These actions may interact in ways that no one person foresaw or intended, but the choice of personal beings was operative in everything.

God chooses some things and might run parts of the world in a mechanistic, systemic way, but this is less true of social systems, which are more under our own responsibility. Some features of scenes that appear to be unchosen are the aftereffects of choices made in the past, or the choice to not choose, or the preference to not choose. Scenes behave differently when there are people making conscious choices in them versus ones in which people choose not to choose or prefer not to choose. Every element in a scene participates because someone chose to participate, so without choice, there would be no scene.

Certainly one of the virtues of a scene is that it does not control people, and another is that it is not subject to the life and death cycle of an individual organization. It is good to choose not to control scenes or their elements, to preserve the ability of individuals to make choices and test

their preferences against reality. However, there are times when a person's agency is threatened by another member of a scene, and then it can be justified for someone within the scene to exert some kind of control against the other member (a group bans someone from their events, for instance). A general goal for scenes (for people thinking about scenes) can be agency-maximization.

The preceding three paragraphs together say something like: you have to choose in order to do your part in developing a scene, but generally it is best to not make other choices within a scene, to allow other people to make their own choices. If you make very many choices for other people in a scene, you start to turn it into one large organization, instead of a scene.

So maybe I can try to define a scene, having given those examples: A scene is an interconnected collection of essentially independent elements of social life (events, venues, groups, individuals), and their spirits and "institutions" (habits and expectations).

Individuals (individually or corporately) are aware of other elements of the scene and have some ability to interact with multiple elements, or to refrain from one element in order to participate in another. So a scene can include loyalty to one group, but also includes all the other possible groups, and the pathways by which people can participate in other groups. It tends to include features that seemingly nobody consciously chooses, things that are "in the air". No one person or organization is in control of a scene as a whole. Anyone can extend a scene, without permission, simply by making an element known to people in the scene that is fitting with the concept of the scene (Christianity, open mic nights, etc.) or which mostly attracts people who primarily know each other from the scene.

Labels: #culture, #life choices, #longer, #metaphysics, #relationships, #religion, #social connection, #trust

Agency and AI

%agency-and-ai

Monday, October 19, 2020

There are probably other ways to come to define agency, but I come at this from the angle of thinking about artificial intelligence.

One version of our (perhaps not-so-distant) AI-affected future is that one AI will completely take over, rule the whole world. (The other version is that there will be multiple AI (and perhaps humans) which collectively, perhaps as something scene-like analogous to the international system of national governments, rule or prefer not to rule the whole world.)

If one AI takes over the whole world, we would hope that it was programmed in such a way that it was aligned with human well-being. But there's at least two problems. One is, the technical challenge of getting an AI to actually be aligned any particular way. It isn't always easy to code concepts, even ones which you can more or less live according to, yourself, as a human. The other is that people don't really know what human well-being is. I can think of a few different approaches to well-being: humans should feel pleasure, should not feel pain, should feel "ought-to-be-ness" (a concept to be discussed in my upcoming review of *The Feeling of Value*), should have their preferences satisfied, should have their trust maximized, should be "good people" (according to Christianity? What kind of Christianity? Or a kind of Islam? Or another religion? Or a branch of secular thinking?), should relate properly to reality (what does that mean?), should relate properly to God (which one?).

Given this profusion of options, one might conclude that it is unlikely that this is even the complete list, and also that if you wanted to code all these, it would be difficult, and you would tend to have to make a lot of decisions about how to balance goals that seemed to contradict in particular cases. And, at best, one strain of humanity would actually like what you were coming up with. As you designed your AI, you would be writing the constitution of the future world's culture and government, but it's likely that many or most people wouldn't approve of the decisions you were making.

So you might think that the wise and humble thing to do would be to try to make an AI that ceded as much decision-making ability to humans as possible. That way, over the coming centuries, humans could all participate in a process that humans have been participating in for hundreds of years, of proposing one or another version of human well-being and living by it, hoping to win over their neighbors. Perhaps

someday we would have settled on one version of human well-being, and AI could maximize that. (Or maybe even then it should hang back, and we should hang back a little ourselves, because human consensus does not prove alignment with ultimate reality.) But until then, the AI would simply facilitate that process by which we make decisions.

So the AI might try to maximize agency. Agency, in this particular formulation, being "the ability to secure one's own decision-making ability and minimal physical liberty". The AI would try to keep people from dying, and help build them up to be capable of seeing things from their own point of view, so that they could make their own decisions if they chose to, and then at least minimally act on them, by not being impeded from moving their bodies. The AI would take into account the ways in which people's actions impair each other's decision-making abilities (psychological coercion, causing trauma, causing pain above a certain threshold, etc.), and do its best to create a society with fewer such impairments.

So there could be such a thing as "agency utilitarianism", whereby we try to build up the greatest number of people in the greatest way, to be able to function and make their own decisions, and sometimes to defend themselves, if they want to.

We already have world-ruling AI (of a sort), which are states. We also have elite cultures, such as those capable of designing powerful technologies or policies, or those capable of significantly influencing those designers. People in a position of power or "eliteness" are in a position where they can make decisions on behalf of other people. The greater the power, and the greater the differential between elites and non-elites, the more that elites or states resemble world-ruling AI. States and elites, like AI, also have the problem of not really knowing what human well-being is, and of not necessarily being aligned with it, whatever they take it to be. (The people who design AI are themselves part of the elite.)

It's hard to "code" a particular definition of well-being in systems made up of human beings, just as it is in AI. How would we actually get a state, an elite culture, or a culture at large (all of which rule over individual citizens) to adhere to one, correct, fully-featured definition of well-being? If we try to coordinate them all on one idea, the simpler the better. So perhaps the idea to implement should be for each citizen to be able to pursue a true definition of well-being, and to be able to pursue that and offer to share it with others, in ways that do not impede others' pursuit of the same. And thus, agency as the value for rulers to maximize, while citizens may seek anything more intense and true.

Labels: #AI, #culture, #futurism, #longer, #mental strength, #power, #psychology, #respect, #trust, #wisdom

Choose by the Spirit of Jesus

%choose-by-spirit-of-jesus

Wednesday, October 21, 2020

If you are thinking of going down a path in life (for instance, choosing a career), then you might ask, Which path causes me to become more like Jesus? Another way to look at this is to catch yourself in a moment where you are filled with the spirit (the breath) of Jesus, when you inhabit the vibe of Jesus, and see which path it permits. Can you have that spirit when you are doing a certain career? If not, if you can avoid it, don't pursue that career.

Labels: #career, #Jesus, #life choices, #note, #seeking

US Election, 2020

%us-election-2020

Saturday, October 31, 2020

Election season is coming to an end. In the spirit of the season, here are some other people's opinions about whether to vote, and how to vote:

Karen Swallow Prior claims that both candidates are questionable morally, and neither is really in favor of Christian values. So she plans to vote third-party in this election.

Rob Wiblin offers an effective altruist perspective, emphasizing the high expected value of a vote in a sufficiently competitive election. Contains an interesting tip: vote for the candidate that is polling high globally, since they are affected by whoever wins -- especially true in the US.

We Are Not Saved here offers a case for writing-in (your vote sends more of a signal than if you vote for a mainstream candidate) and here predicts that the election won't change things as much as people think.

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I tend to be apolitical, and can see some reason for me personally to lean that way for a while. Having said that, here is a statement from me about leadership a propos elections.

Also, since voting is like anything else, in a way, the previous post may be relevant.

Labels: #Christianity, #life choices, #morality, #note, #politics, #wisdom

News: 2 November 2020

%news-2-november-2020

Monday, November 2, 2020

I've been working on a Tumblr for a while and added a link to it to 10v24.net. Mainly it's a place to post quotations and reblog other Tumblr users. Sometimes I post short original posts there. If you're on Tumblr, feel free to follow.

Also, today I released *The Future of Beauty*, a short story (or an essay, depending on your point of view).

Labels: #news and meta

Book Review Preview: X-Risk by Thomas Moynihan

%book-review-preview-x-risk-by-thomas

Saturday, November 7, 2020

See also the main review.

I got my copy of Thomas Moynihan's *X-Risk: How Humanity Discovered Its Own Extinction* in the mail today. I may start reading it soon.

Here are a few things I'm interested in from this book: 1) general intellectual history; 2) the history of existential risk; 3) a chance to meditate on history / civilizational development in general; 3) a chance to meditate on existential risk; 4) engage with Moynihan's "seeing existential risk is a sign that we are mature" idea.

I don't think I'll try to read it twice, unless it seems like a good idea once I get through it once. It's a history book and not a philosophy book.

Labels: #book review, #culture, #death, #futurism, #history, #Thomas Moynihan

Unbearability and Attractiveness

%unbearability-and-attractiveness

Sunday, November 8, 2020

Pain is wrong, evil, bad, say some. But to me, it is almost always at worst unbearable, in itself. Pleasure is right and good, say some. But to me, it is often at best attractive.

If something is attractive enough, you find it difficult or impossible to resist trusting it, moving toward it, taking it in. If it is unbearable enough, you find it difficult or impossible to resist closing off to it, distrusting it, moving away from it, destroying it, shutting it down.

But is it you that values what is attractive? Or that disvalues what is unbearable? Not necessarily. You can value what is unbearable and disvalue what is attractive. Nor is it clear that what is attractive ought to be valued, or what is unbearable ought not to be valued. It is practical, all things being equal, that your attractions and valuings, and what is unbearable to you and your disvaluings, line up. But it is not necessarily right that they do so, except insofar as what is practical makes it more possible to pursue what is really right.

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(Added 2 December 2020)

Things which cannot be borne for all eternity are at least a little bit unbearable. If you can bear it for all eternity, it's fully bearable.

Labels: #definition, #desire, #fear, #idealization, #meaning, #morality, #psychology, #trust

Bearing and Valuing

%listening-to-hold-music-same-loop-30

Sunday, November 8, 2020

Listening to the hold music -- the same loop, 30 seconds to a minute long. The first time it sound a little nice. Soon it becomes irritating. But you have to bear it in order to get the prize -- a representative. You have to listen -- at any moment the representative could pick up the phone and you need to be ready. You have incentive to bear the hold music.

Do you think the hold music is good? It is pleasant but in its repetition you find its flaws. It was never the greatest music to begin with. You judge it to be mediocre. But as it plays, you judge it to be worse than mediocre, offensive in its repetition. You need to relate to the hold music as it is -- repetitive. You are encouraged to change your value of the hold music. You don't have to. But if you judge it to be good, if you fall in love with it (as in this illustration), you can bear it better.

So the fact that we are forced to experience something biases us toward calling it good. To experience is to bear. We can fight, keep the dissonance arising when we bear the unbearable. Or we can accept, and find the unbearable bearable.

Labels: #aesthetics, #mental health, #mental strength, #morality, #note, #power, #psychology, #trust

Trusting God, Caring Like God

%trusting-god-caring-like-god

Monday, November 9, 2020

Should we trust God in everything? Or should we care like God cares? Is it the case that everything turns out according to his will? Or is there an element of tragedy possible in the world?

If our trust in God prevents us from caring like he does, there could be a problem. Likewise if our caring prevents us from trusting in him, there could be a problem. Either way, we could fail to become like him, when we could have had greater kinship. Trusting God enables him to change us into being more like him, and caring like God cares helps us to become like him.

By trusting in God, we can come to care more. By caring, we put ourselves in the position to trust. The more we care, the more we consider something to be valuable. Then, the more valuable it is, the more we can entrust when we put it in God's hands.

Labels: #altruism, #courage, #empathy, #God, #love, #maturity, #trust

God is a Good Utility Monster

%god-is-good-utility-monster

Tuesday, November 10, 2020

In calculating well-being, we might want to know who it is whose experiences matter most. One approach, used here, is to count neurons. The more neurons, the more experience, and the more moral value.

This is a somewhat crude way to do things, but the underlying assumption makes sense on some level. There is some quantity of psychological sensitivity which can be taken to correlate with number of neurons. What we're really interested in is that quantity of psychological sensitivity, which can be aggregated. We can add up quantities of sensitivity within and among beings, and compare those numbers, judging that certain groups or individuals suffer more than others.

This leads us to the subject of utility monsters. A utility monster is very psychologically sensitive, and so the satisfaction of their subjective well-being seems to legitimately call for more of society's resources, taking away from those who are less sensitive. There becomes an incentive for everyone to become more and more sensitive. Perhaps if an AI rules the world, programmed to be compassionate, if you want to game it to get more of the world's resources, then construct a being who wants what you want, but who is extremely psychologically sensitive.

What would the MSLN view of the subject be?

It seems that the metaphysical organism (the "M" in "MSLN") would have the greatest psychological sensitivity of all. Because it is conscious of all other consciousnesses, it is sensitive to all the pain and pleasure or other meaningful states of all other beings. Further, as a person, it can see all the different perspectives that arise from comparing all other psychological states, and all other second-order thoughts about all beings' psychological states.

We can intensify this by bringing in simantism and legitimism ("S" and "L"). The metaphysical organism is also simantism's Speaker, who speaks each simantic word to each person, keeping track of how all the words relate to each other, being prepared beforehand to speak a word to someone whose preferences call for it, having in mind each word. Legitimism adds that this Speaker (God) establishes ought, a specific way that things should be which is absolute, and thus that things can really be

absolute violations of this ought. And thus it can be incredibly painful, and elating, to be God, extraordinarily psychologically complex.

This makes it sound like God is the ultimate utility monster. And perhaps that is appropriate. In the Bible, God says "have no other gods before me". There is a parallel between utility monsters and gods. We think we must serve them. But we might mistake which of them are really most deserving. So to avoid idolatry, if we want to be utilitarians, we should identify the true utility monster, and this will be the being that we and our civilization serve.

God is a good utility monster because he is inherently in solidarity with us. In other words, from the metaphysical organism idea, what we know about God is that he experiences exactly what we experience, and thus finds unbearable exactly what we find unbearable. So God is on the side of our lives going well, at least in the sense of them being bearable. And we also can suppose from the metaphysical organism idea that God values our existence -- otherwise why go through all the unbearable feelings that we occasion? He could cease to experience us (and so we would cease to experience anything coming from him, which is all or nearly all of what we experience.) Enduring the unbearable is hard for any being. So our existences, the fact that we exist as persons who experience, is of high value to God. Therefore whatever he calls for, as the ultimate utility monster, will have to involve the ultimate elimination of all unbearable psychological states, and the prolonging of the existence of all personal beings.

This does not exhaust the subject of what God calls for, but it is a baseline by which we can know him to be trustworthy from our perspective. So, unlike some false ones, God is a good utility monster.

Labels: #altruism, #empathy, #God, #longer, #morality, #philosophy, #suffering God

Approach With Courage, Believe in the Existence of Yourself

%approach-with-courage-believe-in

Thursday, November 12, 2020

Who are you, really? What are you responsible for, in any situation? Some people are unable to voluntarily move, except for their eyelids, by which they can communicate -- or some, not even that. What are they responsible for? Who are they? The connection there is "who you are is what you choose". Maybe that's an overly simplistic view of human nature, but I think it at least captures something important, and I tend to want to favor it.

We face limitations due to aging -- we may all face that, either now, or, if we survive, in our future. There are other limitations besides that, which occur with less universality. Are we defined by our limitations? It depends on what we mean by "we". I would say that the paralyzed person is not defined by their paralysis. If they were put in a different body somehow, they would physically act out their personality. The body is accidental, not essential. I can't hold a paralyzed person responsible for not moving -- maybe partially so if they knowingly chose to paralyze themself (a rare occurrence), but even then, they would no longer be able to change their minds after the fact, and would have to live with the decision of their past self, who increasingly would be becoming to them a separate person. Likewise, I can't hold myself 100% responsible for the body or life that I'm stuck with. To an extent, it's not me. Essentially, it's something stuck to me, and to a large extent, other things than my choices are responsible for it.

However, it is more true that the way that I approach life emotionally, with my inner eye, and with my inner will, and the way I choose to think, does express who I am. If I were completely paralyzed, but still myself and still conscious, how I thought about life, and paralysis, would be me, would be an exercise and expression of me being myself. The state of my heart in the present moment is a root responsibility that I am always capable of disposing of properly.

So in this space of minimal limitation, in the world of what I choose to think and how I choose to see, I can express and exercise my heart (the true preferences and intentions within me) by having courage. To

approach whatever there is, and whatever limits me, without flippancy, arrogance, impatience, or despair, but rather with courage.

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Forces like depression and anxiety can seem to be me, and I can feel, in despair, that they are more powerful than me, that I must bow to them. In a sense, perhaps I must. If I must bow to them, how can there be a God? My mind can shut down to the spiritual and intellectual world if I identify so totally with my limitations. I can live in a narrow world, made up of practical concerns and the desire for the luck or therapy for me to not be beset by my psychological problems. If I am so limited, in a world where the only relevant thing is my narrow well-being, and God is not admitted as a person who can address that narrow well-being, of course for me God does not exist. I might say that he exists, or halfway believe it, but on the level of trusting, I do not believe that he exists.

In some way, the sense that I am not myself in the face of mental forces connects with my inability to say "God exists". Perhaps because in order for me to believe in the existence of God, I need to believe in the existence of myself. Myself, a free-willed being, who sees things according to his own lights, and thus is able to see the intellectual and spiritual world, things which are true in themselves, apart from what is forced on me, things which I must find unbearable or attractive in the pragmatic, personal, social, psychological world.

In a natural theology like simantism, it is important that *I* exist, a person, and that I can relate to what is not-me. From this, there is relationality, and I am not alone. From this, and for other reasons, if I am a person, then the universe can be personal. There is a give-and-take between me and what is not-me that suggests that what is not-me is a person. There is an analogy between myself, who is conscious, and what is not-me, which then might ought to be seen as conscious. If I, a consciousness, choose and cause, then what I experience might ought to also be chosen and caused by a conscious person. For these reasons, I might think that I live in relationality to all that is, and that all that is is a person. But if I am not a person, then maybe it is not.

If I exist, on some level, I am awake, in a way that I am not when I somehow think that I don't exist.

Perhaps too, if I slip below the waves into non-existence, I can no longer relate to God, can no longer really be a moral person or an obedient person, for not being able to be myself, choosing. I can still go through the motions of life -- who wouldn't? I can flow away from unbearability and toward what is attractive, automatically and inevitably. But on a deeper level, I can't relate to God, and on a deeper level, what we can't or don't relate to, doesn't exist to us.

But as long as I can recognize facts, I recognize the fact that I exist.

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You have real limitations, but if you can remember, you always exist. And then there is always some level on which you can be courageous, given whatever limitations you have.

Labels: #courage, #God, #life choices, #longer, #meaning, #mental health, #mental strength, #metaphysics, #patience, #personal, #psychology

Leading God's Perception

%leading-gods-perception

Friday, November 13, 2020

The true understanding of a simantic word is to understand it the way God does. Then your attribution of "good" to it or of any other meaning will be compatible with God's understanding of it, in line the most with how he speaks it to other people.

So we have a reason to be led by God's perception, into how we perceive things ourselves.

However, when we are creative, it is possible that we bring into existence, out of our own preferences, wills, and inner intentions, something which did not exist at all before. Then, God is led by us in his perceptions, taking into account what we have created as a new member of what is real. His opinion of this new thing may differ from ours -- it becomes his as soon as we make it. But we did lead him to some extent.

Labels: #creativity, #God, #metaphysics, #note

Defend Against Feelings

%defend-against-feelings

Saturday, November 14, 2020

Some people are stronger than others in who they are. Those people should mourn, on purpose, because they will not be ruled over by their mourning. They will remain themselves even in the presence of negative feelings.

But other people are not as strong in who they are, and feelings can overwhelm them. It might be best for such people to become stronger in who they are, so that *they* can mourn, can see the honor in the loss of something, can faithfully register that some good is gone, or foregone.

You can feel sad in such a way that it is the sadness that is happening, and you are not really the one being sad. But in that case the sadness rules you and punishes you. So then you try not to open yourself to mourning, for fear of letting the sadness in. In the long run, you might seek some way to become a stronger person, become more personal. In a sense, to become more strong-willed, without even your own will ruling over you. But in the short term, it may be best to defend against sad feelings. Or any other feelings that possess and usurp.

Labels: #mental health, #mental strength, #note, #personal, #psychology, #respect

Experience Bodies

%the-experience-body

Monday, November 16, 2020

Epistemic status: provisional.

What is a body? A person has a body -- perhaps a person is a body in the sense that what is truly and always your body is you.

A person can be affected by external things through their body. I can be affected in a powerful way by something striking my body. Also my body responds to my will. As I type, my fingers are mostly faithful to my personal intentions. If my fingers use the "backspace" key, they are more faithful in the end. I can move many parts of my body if I want to. But not all. I can't consciously cause peristalsis, or a heartbeat, for instance.

Loosely, roughly, then, a body is that which is a way for external beings to affect me, and through which I can affect myself, or external beings.

If we consider the world of material objects, the body is that which has arms, legs, hands, and feet, and so on. But if we consider the world of consciousnesses, then everything that I can see can affect me, and I can affect many things in my experience. Thinking simantically, everything that I perceive, I alter (in some sense; to some extent) so that it has the meaning that I see in it. By looking attentively at something, I can make it mean something to me, though what it means is spoken to me in accordance with who I am, by another. So then everything that I, personally, am consciously aware of is part of my body. The physical body has parts that are more, or less, in subjection to my preferences, and so it is with my experiences.

My experience body, then, is the body of all of my experience in a moment. I have it, and it is me, in analogy to how from a materialist point of view, I have a physical body, and am a physical body.

Labels: #definition, #metaphysics, #personal, #philosophy

Position and Rate of Change

%position-and-rate-of-change

Monday, November 16, 2020

Students of calculus or physics know about position and velocity. Velocity is the rate of change of position.

If you have wealth, then where are you going? If you lack, then you move, there is velocity to you. But if you are perfectly satisfied, you don't move. You have no velocity, and so you lack lacking.

If you are perfectly wealthy, you are not attracted to anything or anyone. You are alone on a deeper level.

It matters that you are attracted to something or someone, and it matters to what or to whom you are attracted. Desire is a lack, and part of love is desire, so in order to love, you must be somewhat poor.

Are you poor, or is poverty ruling over you? If you don't eat for 10 hours, is it you who become hungry, or just your stomach? But it is possible for you, the real you, to be oriented toward something, to be attracted, to lack.

Labels: #desire, #imagination, #love, #note, #personal

Sleep

%sleep

Wednesday, November 18, 2020

Epistemic status: provisional and speculative.

What is sleep? Is it a period of unconsciousness, punctuated with dreams which only happen when we experience them? Or are we conscious the whole time, and we generally only remember some dreams, but experience many more than we think we do? Do we really know that consciousness accompanies brain activity that appears to be conscious experience? We might ask if the being that is conscious of an unremembered dream is the same consciousness as our waking self.

These questions are empirical, to some extent. Here's one article from 2016 pointing to some of the unknowns in the field. I may update this post later (or not, depending on if I think of it). For now, I would say that I lean toward thinking sleep is a time that you or I do not experience, except for our dreams. I lean toward thinking that when we talk in our sleep, or sleepwalk, we are possessed by some other spirit. (I think possession is not too rare and shouldn't be seen as any more stigmatizing than mental illness -- a dark reality at times, but more medical than horror film.) When we have dreams that we don't remember, it may be that we ourselves never have them, and that when we have ones that we do, we may be experiencing the exact same experiences as the spirit that possesses us when we sleep, which has all our dreams.

Why do we sleep? We seem to need to or else we go insane. The materialist view would be that something in our brains needs sleep. The "spiritualist" view would be that there is some kind of spirit that sometimes breaks into our consciousness when we are mentally ill, and this spirit is affected by whether we sleep. It could be that God runs two different realities out of the same lives. Both our sleeping self (which may be identical with our "unconscious" self -- a consciousness that shares our experience body to some extent and has its own personhood and will) and our waking rational self. Each of us gets the chance to take the lead, the conscious self during the waking period, and the "unconscious" during sleep. Dreams are where we get a taste of the other self's reality, and perhaps it is able to see what we see with our eyes and experience with our other senses at times, or all the time. It may experience our lives as dreams, or as we do, which may be something as relatively incomprehensible to it as its normal experiential fare -- dreams -- are to us. If this unconscious self doesn't get the chance to be itself, it breaks into our consciousness, perhaps out of a desire to be heard, or simply with the

violence of unhappiness.

Why would God arrange things like this? I'm not really sure. The dream world seems to some to be an independent reality. Certainly it can be seen as being made of consciousness and connected by God, subject to his opinion. But it is a different kind of consciousness. Maybe that consciousness is an integral part of God's consciousness, and he wants it to be expressed in some of his creatures.

Labels: #God, #metaphysics, #note, #psychology, #what is a person?

Do People Exist Apart From Their Phenomena in the Moment?

%do-people-exist-apart-from-their

Wednesday, November 18, 2020

Epistemic status: provisional.

Do people exist apart from their phenomena in the moment? If everything is consciousness, it might seem not -- in other words, that people are identical with their experience bodies. One seeming counterpoint is sleep, another comas. If it's possible for there to be true unconsciousness, followed by a return to being more or less the same person, then does our new self each morning or after a coma pop into existence out of nothing, strangely similar to or even almost the same as before we lost consciousness? I know that I exist as a person, this is the root of my knowledge. That person is not contingent on whether I slept or underwent a coma. But of course that person changes over time, and the philosophy of personal identity raises questions about the ability to say that there is one subject per life-story. And yet my root knowledge is that one subject exists, that is me. That one subject is the one to whom I relate as myself. There are aspects of who I am that are not accessible to me in my experience body, in the moment. Yet I know that I exist, that I have depth. My past choices are real and sometimes really part of me even if I have forgotten them.

The MSLN approach to this is to say that through God, all the phenomena in my own or another's experience body is known by God, and God has his own opinions of who we are. In a sense, we are each simantic words, and the words take their definition from God's understanding of them. We are people with depth because God speaks our experience bodies in a way consistent with who we are as simantic words. Over time, we shape that simantic word, through our choices in the present moment, as subjects.

Because God knows us and remembers who we are, he can recreate us whenever we become conscious. He is conscious of us when we are unconscious.

There is a certain extent to which our past selves really are our present selves, and also an extent to which they are not. When we have really grown past the past, it is allowed to no longer bear on the present. (For

instance, God "remembers our sins no more".) So it is possible for us to no longer be the people we were in the past, even though our history will always be ours. Painful past memories can be looked at with neither the shame of being the victim nor of being the perpetrator, when we are no longer the same people.

Labels: #longer, #metaphysics, #philosophy, #what is a person?

God Knows the Thing-in-itself

%god-knows-thing-in-itself

Friday, November 20, 2020

Epistemic status: provisional.

I can see phenomena -- qualia, concepts, etc. Are these things real? I have reason to think that when I see something in my environment, for instance, a trash can, it is certainly real. It could be that a trash can is simply the conjunction of qualia and concepts -- the thing just is its appearance.

It's not so easy to say that another personal being just is the experiencing of it. I could say "I only see a distinct personal being, but in reality what is there is just a bundle of qualia and concepts." But what I really experience is a person, who presumably has thoughts and feelings unrelated to me, who goes off somewhere else and forgets about me, and whom I can misrepresent to myself from lack of information about them, or due to various biases. Arguably, the trash can mentioned above is simply part of my experience body, but people themselves are or have experience bodies distinct from my own.

It's a real practical concern to know the person-in-themself. Can we relate to a real person, or are we always cursed to relate to the phenomena of people? While knowledge of other people is always imperfect, and subject to being broken by human formulalessness, can we at least somehow *relate* to the real person behind the phenomena, and if so, how?

The MSLN view is that God is the one from whose opinion all things derive, is the one through whom all things are metaphysically connected, and is the one who causes concepts to refer to what they refer to, by serving phenomena that correspond with simantic words. Therefore every thing-in-itself is connected to God, and he knows it, and through him the phenomena come that give us our acquaintance with it. So through him, we can really relate to things, even if in some strange sense, we have no idea what they are in themselves, apart from the phenomena we have seen. And so it is possible to relate to people as people, rather than as experiences.

Labels: #epistemology, #formulalessness, #God, #metaphysics, #note, #philosophy, #what is a person?

Different Ways of Valuing

%different-ways-of-valuing

Saturday, November 21, 2020

Recently I watched the following video, which gave me some thoughts about how to value things:

{{Embedded YouTube video titled **ISA ALBUM - RAYLA NOEL (2004, Remastered 2020)** on the channel **Vihan Damaris**}}

Rayla Noel's album Isa*, featuring her paintings.*

One way to value things is hedonically. How much pleasure does it give us? I can say that this album does work on that level for me sometimes.

Another way is to value things preferentially. How much does this satisfy my preferences? Perhaps I was in the mood for the album, therefore it is good.

[21 February 2022: "I was in the mood for the album" in the sense of "My genuine preferences at the time predisposed me to choose it" (that's a sort of "steelman" of what I wrote). Otherwise I might be under some kind of spell cast by a mood that is not me, which causes me to hedonically value the album (another interpretation of "I was in the mood for the album).]

Another way to value things is fiducially. How much does this increase my receptivity to enhancement? I would say that this album does so more than a lot of things that are better at being hedonistic.

Yet another is to ask if it increases my agency? I'm not sure... maybe not too obviously. Maybe it encourages me somewhat, and that helps.

What about receptivity to reality? There are at least two ways to go with this. One is "reality is really just persons". In that case, does a song or album get you in the mode of consuming experience, or of connecting with people? I find that less-professional music helps me connect more with people. And also, a piece of music can help me connect with another person directly. I found this piece of music online by myself, but if someone had recommended it to me directly, I might have connected more with that person. To some small degree, I connect with the artist through this. This connection is valuable apart from any pleasure, pain, or preference satisfaction. The connection is not about my experience of the person, but about the person herself.

Another way to go with receptivity to reality is to say that each being has its own distinct nature and identity. Because something is different, it is

valuable. If it is really bad, it is different, and therefore valuable. Perhaps we can't bear all bad things, but to bear bad things when we can is a good thing. Maybe things that are very much themselves are valuable, whether they are uncommon or not. They bring their reality to the world faithfully, allowing others to be receptive to their reality.

Pascalian and Non-Pascalian Nonzeros

%pascalian-and-non-pascalian-nonzeros

Wednesday, December 2, 2020

Pascalian and non-Pascalian nonzero chances, definition: Any conceivable thing has a nonzero chance of being real -- we can call that the Pascalian nonzero chance. When we have some more solid reason to believe in something, the chance of it being real is also nonzero, is somehow higher, and can be called a non-Pascalian nonzero chance.

--

In estimating risk and reward, there are two kinds of nonzero chances I know of: what I will call "Pascalian" and "non-Pascalian".

Blaise Pascal proposed a famous Wager, which goes something like this:

> If God exists:
>
> > Being aligned with God promises eternal life. Value = infinity.
> >
> > Not being aligned with God promises hell. Value = minus infinity.
>
> If God does not exist:
>
> > Being aligned with God promises a finite life, followed by annihilation. (That life might be better or worse because of your alignment with the God-idea and God-community which must stand in for God if he doesn't exist.) Value = something finite.
> >
> > Not being aligned with God promises a finite life, followed by annihilation. Value = something finite.

Expected value calculations are made by multiplying the expected payoff of a course of action by its likelihood.

> Investment is risky but can be rational if the expected profits are high enough. If you have good information about the likelihood and reward, if you keep pursuing investments with high expected values, in the long run you will win big at least a few times, and make up for all the times you don't. You can make expected value a part of your lifestyle, pursuing all kinds of rewards, so that at least one will take. This approach can be used when evaluating whether to invest in alignment with God.
>
> Is it ever rational to act as though God doesn't exist? Seemingly, not if there is a nonzero chance of God existing. Can anyone be 100% certain that God does not exist? Is there any possible way that God could have been the one to create and sustain the world? One would think there is. So if there is a tiny but nonzero chance that God exists, you multiply that by the infinity of eternal life and still get an infinite payout. So your expected value is infinite, no matter how small that tiny but nonzero chance is. Likewise with the negative payout that comes with not being aligned with God. But if you don't align yourself with God, the most you can expect is something finite, a finite life. Align yourself with God, then, no matter what the truth is.

Inspired by Pascal's Wager, some people have discussed Pascal's Mugging. It goes something like this:

> A man walks up to you on the street. He says, "I know you're a rational person. So I have an offer to make you. If you give me $100, there's a nonzero chance that I will give you any finite amount of goodness you want -- just name your price. There's a nonzero chance that I have magical powers." A truly rational person, aware of expected value theory, will seemingly have to offer the mugger the money, in order to follow the dictates of reason which they always do. So knowing this, a mugger can exploit rationalists, by playing on their devotion to expected value.

But rationalists (and atheists) hardly ever seem to want to fall for these appeals. I don't know if real Pascal's Muggings happen (although scams do, and appeals to enormous but unlikely future goods occupy some minds), but I would bet someone has offered Pascal's Wager to an atheist, and the atheist was unimpressed. But what's wrong with the Wager and the offer in the Mugging? If you stick to the possibility and logic, they look pretty

good. Why do we have an intuition against them?

I'm not sure this really explains the intuition, but I can think of one problem with Pascal's Wager, which is that you have to ask "which God?". Any conceivable thing has a nonzero chance of being real -- we can call that the Pascalian nonzero chance. When we have some more solid reason to believe in something, the chance of it being real is also nonzero, is somehow higher, and can be called a non-Pascalian nonzero chance. Well, if being aligned with God requires us to do certain things and hold certain attitudes, we want to know which God that is, to know what those behaviors and attitudes specifically ought to be. If any one deity can be considered to possibly exist simply because he is conceivable, then why not all the other conceivable ones? If we have to satisfy every conceivable deity, we may end up with all of their demands cancelling each other out. And if they don't, it will probably take too much of our time to figure out how they all add up and balance. Deities could be into all kinds of things, in all kinds of proportions, to all kinds of tolerances.

Perhaps a similar objection can be made to the Mugger. Yes, there is a nonzero chance that the mugger is both honest and possessing sufficient magical powers, but if that chance is exactly as high as the chance that anything conceivable can be true, then it is equally likely that some magical thing will happen to cancel out the good the mugger promises (a leprechaun interferes, perhaps). Then if I take the offer, I'm out $100 and I don't get anything back in the end.

What is the size of a Pascalian nonzero? I don't know if anyone has defined it. A solid 1% chance is definitely non-Pascalian. That's something you can work with. 0.1% or 0.01% are also okay. If you keep adding zeros, though, at some point you get Pascalian. Presumably in people's minds (or guts) there's some exact quantification of "Technically it's got a nonzero possibility because it's conceivable". But I'd be hesitant to mention what it is for me, perhaps because if I did the math I'd have to do something I didn't want to do. I would have been hoping the low number I'd assign to my Pascalian nonzero would make it effectively zero in all practical calculations, but some mugger could offer me a sufficiently high reward, and I'd feel rationally compelled to give him $100.

Labels: #agnosticism, #God, #imagination, #longer, #math, #rationality, #wisdom

Valuing Lives, Valuing Persons

%valuing-lives-valuing-persons

Thursday, December 3, 2020

In metaethics, there can seem to be a focus on providing people high quality of life. There is talk of lives worth living, lives barely worth living, and lives not worth living. This can be seen, for instance, in discussion of the Repugnant Conclusion.

Some people live lives of suffering and despair, lives which might be considered to be of poor quality. As altruists, we want to end all such lives.

The most expedient way to end a poor life is through death. The other way is through improving it until it is no longer poor. People living poor quality lives don't always have the choice to improve their lives, but they generally have the choice to end their lives.

But many of them do not, and live through their poor quality lives for a long time. Why do they live these inferior lives? One reason might be that they value themselves, and the only way they can exist is to live some kind of life, and a poor life is all that is available.

We can value persons for their qualities, not just as streams of experiences, or as series of experienced states of affairs. We can even value people purely for themselves, apart from any specific qualities. Value can reside in persons, and qualities of persons, and not just in experiences.

When life is at all unbearable, you pay a tax to keep living. If the unbearability is too great, you are tempted to die rather than pay the seemingly unaffordable tax. Having a higher quality of life keeps us away from such self-disvaluing.

Adversity is a part of life, but in the far enough future, may not be. Currently, we value ourselves by paying for our own lives. Can we really value ourselves without adversity, which makes us pay? It seems that it is possible to value things after having paid the price, but maybe not before. Maybe we will have to keep some adversity, or unbearability, in our experiential diet. Or we will have to figure out a way for us to truly value ourselves without paying for ourselves.

Labels: #altruism, #economics, #love, #metaethics, #what is a person?

Ethics as Wealth-Maximization

%ethics-as-wealth-maximization

Thursday, December 3, 2020

Ethics can be seen as "wealth-maximization", where quality of life is the wealth. But perhaps there is a different way of being ethical, that is less quantitative, or less economic in vibe. What would ethics be in a world without possession, where people meet each other only as people, not as rich or beautiful, or kind or patient? You and nothing but you, meeting someone else and no more. Or maybe there's a less "Buberian" way to avoid the wealth-maximization interpretation of ethics. Perhaps deontological ethics can ignore wealth, and have absolutes that are not part of a larger economy.

A truly moral person sometimes forgets the larger economy and lives only in the moment. You test yourself against your moment, not trying to make all the moments good. Making all moments good is possible perhaps only if we are economic and additive, utilitarian. If you cause other people distressing moments, then they can test themselves against such moments. The value in life comes from whether you pass the test, which reflects on you, rather than the quality of your circumstances, which does not. So if persons are valuable in themselves, in that way, what remains to those who seek to benefit all beings is to teach people to make good choices in whatever circumstance they are in, and to keep people from dying so that they continue to exist. And maybe even keeping people alive so that they keep existing is not essential, because the fact of a good person having existed remains even after the extinction of the human race.

Labels: #altruism, #courage, #death, #economics, #holiness, #metaethics, #morality, #note

Temptation and Anti-temptation

%temptation-and-anti-temptation

Friday, December 4, 2020

Epistemic status: provisional.

A temptation is when you feel a pull toward doing something bad. The pull has something to do with who you are (often), but is other than you. Perhaps this pull is experienced as thoughts, or as hungers, or feelings -- anything that can have power over your decision-making process. You don't have to give in to temptation, but you are more likely to do bad or become bad when tempted. A real temptation (as opposed to being overcome by a spirit) never forces you to do something wrong, but it does correlate with and partly cause your free decision to do wrong. Or perhaps rather than causing your decision, it only occasions it. But without the occasion, the decision would not have happened, and it would not have altered you or your life.

In MSLN terms, a temptation pulls you away from God, from connection with God, loyalty to God, valuing God, love of God. But an anti-temptation is like a temptation, except that it biases you toward connection with God, loyalty to God, valuing God, loving God (and thus obeying and honoring God, among other consequent pursuits). It doesn't make up your mind for you or force you to do or be good apart from who you really are, how you really choose. Perhaps sometimes the Holy Spirit overcomes us so that we are encouraged in our religious walk, or to enable us to do things that we are not good enough to do, because those things are things God needs to get done through us in the moment. But these indwellings, if so strong as to be "not of us", aren't what I would call anti-temptations. Sometimes the Spirit can create an environment in us in which we are anti-tempted, thus in which we still have some ability to not seek God or to not do the right thing.

You can get yourself into a rut by giving in to temptations, but get out of it by giving in to anti-temptations. Anti-temptations are not only "given in to", but also "affirmed" -- maybe more commonly in order to participate in them we must affirm them, rather than giving in to them. Martin Buber's idea of "good as whole-souled decision" is what anti-temptation calls for. Anti-temptation does not feel the same as temptation, is made out of a different material, as it were. Generally the "giving in" of anti-temptation feels different from that of temptation.

Labels: #definition, #God, #Holy Spirit, #morality, #psychology

Contexts

%contexts

Monday, December 7, 2020

Human experience goes in and out of different contexts. A context is a complete and sufficient psychological place, a set of assumptions and meanings, and sensory experiences, its own complete world. In each context, we have a radically different future and past. And yet somehow it is possible to go from one context to another. I suppose you could imagine yourself as a solipsist, puzzling over this. You look to pure experience, as though experience is all that there is, and marvel at how pasts and futures can change, as time goes on. Each context is its own self-sufficient reality, yet it can lead to another, completely different one. Somehow you can be aware of this.

Labels: #definition, #philosophy, #psychology

Field vs. Market

%field-vs-market

Monday, December 7, 2020

A market is a segment of the population who will pay you for a good or service. There is a demand there.

A field is a location in time or space, or a segment of the population, in which your action is called for. There is a demand or implicit demand there as well.

The difference is that a market is specifically oriented toward making money, deriving self-benefit. If you're interested in profit, you're interested in markets. Whereas a field is oriented toward making use of your ability to do things. If you're interested in doing things, you're interested in fields.

Labels: #altruism, #definition, #economics

Sin, About Us

%sin-about-us

Monday, December 7, 2020

Sometimes we think that sin is about us, about who we've proved ourselves to be, about how we've messed up, about how we are frauds, about that thing that we did, about us.

Guilt can be self-focused. When guilty, we can forget the people we've harmed. Even in the midst of feeling guilty about what we did to them, we focus on what *we* did, that one moment, instead of the bigger picture of who they are. And guilt can make us forget any outside reality, outside of that one act we did. It traumatizes and obsesses us, sometimes more than the person we harmed.

Guilt over the seen and vivid can blind us to our responsibility to the persons we can't see, including God.

Labels: #altruism, #God, #mental health, #morality, #note, #personal, #psychology

Betrayal, Insult to the Organ of Trust

%betrayal-insult-to-organ-of-trust

Monday, December 7, 2020

Betrayal can defined as anything that is an insult to the organ of trust. "Insult" is used here in a medical sense, of something that causes shock, stress, injury or the like to an organ. The organ must recover in order to trust again. The "organ of trust" can be taken as a metaphor for the set of different receptivities or functions within a person or a person's body. It may be that the brain itself is an organ of trust.

Labels: #definition, #psychology, #trust

Degrees of Existence

%degrees-of-existence

Monday, December 7, 2020

When something exists to me, in some way it is not separate from me. What I can see with my eyes is wrapped up in my experience, is part of my experience body. If it does not exist to me, it is separate from me, and a thing that does not exist at all does not even have the possibility of coming into relation with me. It is as though it is infinitely separate from me. Some of the things I can see with my eyes, I'm not focusing on -- they are more separate, but still not so far away from my person.

Perhaps the intimate but non-obvious identity of my experience with part of God's as in the metaphysical organism idea lends itself to being read as God's non-existence. The being who is close in every way fades into the background -- as the background is everywhere, but the foreground is not. What I do not focus on exists less to me.

Labels: #God, #note, #philosophy, #psychology

Why Take Offensive Doctrines Seriously?

%why-take-offensive-doctrines-seriously

Thursday, December 10, 2020

Is religion something that connects to a human-judgment-independent reality, or is it something we make up for our own purposes? If the latter, then it is easy to cast judgment on certain doctrines. I will take for perhaps the strongest example eternal conscious torment. That is the view that hell is eternal and involves people being conscious of torment, which we should assume will affect some people.

Who would make up such a thing? Maybe someone who wanted to scare people. Or maybe there are side effects to belief in eternal conscious torment that are desirable. It might regulate people's behavior, motivate evangelical love, give purpose, or give life a welcome sense of gravity. We might think that none of these benefits would be worth frightening sensitive people, or worth giving us a view of God such that he would torture people for all eternity. If religious beliefs are made up for human purposes, what kind of person could be so cruel, to put that idea in children's minds, an idea that would rule their lives with fear? We could easily decide to suppress such a doctrine, since there would be no way it could be true if we didn't make it true by believing it (to whatever extent that that would make it true).

However, if God exists in a factual way, then it becomes important to consider the possibility that the things ascribed to God by people who believe in God might be true. And also, the things that we ourselves see, when we investigate. What we see has some connection with what really is, and that may be the case of any observer of life and the Bible. If we want to know the reality of God, then we want to know what he's like, and not just what we want him to be like. So we should look for the truth, and consider the points of view that we do not yet understand, held by other people. It may not be possible to understand God perfectly, just as it may not be possible to understand physics perfectly, but we should understand God enough for what is vital to our lives, like we understand the basics of how gravity works, or the dynamics of driving a car.

Labels: #God, #note, #psychology, #rationality, #religion

Is Eternal Conscious Torment Compatible with MSLN?

%is-eternal-conscious-torment-compatible

Thursday, December 10, 2020

Epistemic status: provisional in the sense that, I think somewhere in MSLN there is reason to not believe in eternal conscious torment, but these arguments in their exact form may need revision; and also that I can only provide natural theological arguments right now.

9 May 2021: small edit, and added a postscript.

27 May 2021: added a paragraph, rewrote postscript.

Eternal Conscious Torment (ECT) is the doctrine that some people will go to hell, existing forever in a state of conscious torment. It is an offensive doctrine, but one which may yet be true. Ordinarily we look at the Bible as the source for this doctrine. In the future I may be able to consider what the Bible says, overall, but for now, I will consider natural theology: reasoning about God. Reason is used in interpreting the Bible, and many people find reason trustworthy in itself, perhaps more so than the Bible. Natural theology and the Bible talk about the same subject: God. So what does the natural theology of MSLN say about ECT?

Would God want to or need to send people to hell in MSLN?

One popular definition of hell is "separation from God".

God may be able to bear us for a long time, but what is unbearable at all can't be borne forever. Fundamentally, God is the way he is (he is the right way he should be from the beginning). We differ from God in some ways that he can't bear (we are "sinful"). So either we must change to fit God, or we must be separated from God. A separation into ECT? Or a separation that destroys us? (The latter view is called annihilationism; "Annihilation": to make nothing.) Presumably, no one can exist when completely separated from God.

MSLN argument: the metaphysical organism

The idea of the metaphysical organism is a hypothesis about the means by

which otherwise separate consciousnesses connect. In it, a consciousness connects to another consciousness by being conscious of its exact consciousness. Further, whatever connects me to the outside world experiences exactly what I do. So that being would experience ECT as well as I would. If God is the being who connects all consciousnesses, he would have to experience the ECT of all those who made themselves enemies of him. Could God ever rest? He would experience the unbearability of their torment for all time. They might not have the ability to stop experiencing what they experienced, but he would. Arguably, unbearability can't be endured forever, not even by God, because God would experience the unbearability as unbearable. So then God would shut down their consciousnesses, and this would be like them being annihilated, rather than experiencing ECT.

MSLN argument: simantism

However, maybe it is possible to think that God could cut himself off from these consciousnesses, and they could somehow exist apart from him. They would "speak" experience to themselves, in place of God, the Speaker. They would have a very limited simantic vocabulary compared to God. Maybe they could only speak the barest proto-conscious sense of will, preference, and trust. If he left them to an existence so minimalist that they couldn't torment themselves, it wouldn't be ECT, and it would resemble annihilation.

If they had a less-minimalist existence, could they torment themselves? Maybe, but not against their will, and though they might be the causes of their torment, the experience of the torment itself would be against their will. So it would be a case of them relating to what was not-them (simantism), and their torment would have to be spoken to them by another being. I have written in this paragraph as though it is possible to speak simantic words without God, but then, the simantic word of the entirety of reality, which is implied by a person's experience in the moment, would be spoken to them, and who can do that other than God? So God would have contact with them and would suffer as they did.

MSLN argument: legitimism

From the point of view of legitimism, whatever exists, in some sense should be, and should be absolutely. Absolute ought comes from a truly worthy will, is a truly worthy opinion. An opinion is conscious and personal, is part of a person. If God's opinion founds all of reality, he is conscious of all that is. Any lack of awareness on his part is of what does not yet exist. And what kind of opinion is so valid that it can found reality? The answer given in legitimism is that God is willing to take on the burdens he lays on others, and is maximally receptive to reality. So then, God would know of and directly experience the ECT of any who

suffer it.

Summary so far

These considerations show that God himself can't escape ECT if any of us remain in it. It is reasonable to guess that God would prefer to rest than to suffer, and it seems that in the very nature of unbearability, there is the inability to willingly endure it forever. So these make a case against ECT.

Does MSLN in some way support eternal conscious torment?

On the other hand, do these natural theologies lend any weight in favor of ECT? Perhaps legitimism does. Legitimism says that there is an absolute ought, which can be violated by personal beings. The violations are an offense against what should be. We know as humans that sometimes exacting a just penalty from someone heals an injustice. And this may be a foundational principle of reality. So, when people do what is unjust, they must pay the penalty so that legitimacy can be healed, unless the penalty is paid for them. So if their injustices are infinite, they deserve infinite punishment, and this could lead to ECT. ECT as a means to justice.

Finite beings don't have the power to cause infinite injustice in a positive sense. So we wouldn't merit ECT. But perhaps by us turning away from helping others, we are willing to shut the door on potentially infinite numbers of people, for all we know or care about, in order to enjoy our small pleasures. This could be considered in some sense an infinite injustice for which we might have to pay eternally.

Counterpoint (27 May 2021):

> Do people who neglect the well-being of others have hearts that truly intended to cause an infinite amount of suffering? Human beings are incapable of truly understanding infinity. It's not even clear that such a thing could actually exist. (In a sense, infinity is inconceivable, and normally, we think that that which is inconceivable can't exist.) I think a God who abides by the simantic word of "reasonable proportion" would say "their hearts were not infinitely bad -- finitely bad is bad enough". No one has a disposition sufficient to will infinity. And those who failed to will good (by turning away from the cries of others) did so at a finite, and not infinite, volume. Whatever concept they had of others suffering, from whom they turned away, was not actually infinite.

The past is broken, made illegitimate by our acts. To fix it, someone could pay the penalty. But we can't pay for all our acts -- we would all die, have

to be destroyed. But God doesn't want us to be destroyed. So he created reality with a more-finite partner, who shares his character. The Father (the metaphysical organism and Speaker), creates with a Son. This Son is legitimacy, as much as the Father is, because they decided on reality together as beings who were disposed to experience the burdens they lay on us. So he can take on the penalty. He dies existentially alone, facing annihilation. He does this willingly. Because he is legitimacy, he does not deserve to die, and so in himself is able to pay the penalty. And so legitimacy is healed. (The penalty is paid once -- if the Son died again, that would create a new injustice, for which there could be no further healing. Having paid the penalty, the Son does not need to remain dead/destroyed, and so he is brought back to life.) This healing of the past of legitimacy, healing of justice, makes it so that the underlying issue of justice is not an obstacle to us avoiding hell.

Though God does not need to punish us for justice's sake, God may still find a kind of punishment useful. We sometimes forget that he loves foolish people and people with a certain amount of psychopathic traits, people who might only repent if they feared death and punishment. There is a place for death, and for suffering hell, in the plan of salvation. But the suffering need not be eternal in order to provide an incentive for the salvation of those who require it. On the other hand, the idea of ECT, in some cultures and time periods, might have been one we liked to believe as a civilization, and were benefited by, even if the reality is that there is no such thing. The stronger image of hell doesn't seem to have been as unacceptably scary in the past, and may have saved some people that the softer image would not have.

A parent might say, "The consequences for hitting your brother are that you don't get to play video games for the rest of the night." They don't want you to do that kind of thing or be that kind of person, and want to give you a reason to see things their way. Hitting your brother is replaying the story of Cain and Abel -- you should be cast out of your house with a mark on you for the rest of your life. But the pain your brother felt, and the pall you cast on the trust and trustworthiness of the house, only merit you missing out on your greatest pleasure for a few hours. So God as the parent can ordain consequences for injustice without them directly paying for the deeper, truer injustice. And like a parent, he would ordain these, one would think, in order to preserve the good of his children in the long run, not for justice's sake.

The natural theologies of MSLN say that ECT is unlikely (God wouldn't want to experience unbearability) and that the parts of legitimism that lend themselves to ECT don't have to (given the death of the Son).

However, this is only part of MSLN. What remains is the interpretation of the Bible (the New Wine System).

What about the biblical component of MSLN?

I may turn toward study of the Bible itself, for myself, at some point, in evaluating MSLN. It seems like something I should do at some point. Until then, I will appeal to a few outside perspectives: the developer of the New Wine System, Philip Brown, favors annihilationism (giving arguments for that position in *New Wine for the End Times*) and this article and this article give me reason to believe that there are valid arguments for annihilationism, and that there is a debate -- it's not like annihilationism is a strange thing that no respectable Bible interpreter espouses. So for now I can leave the question of what the Bible says undecided, allowing for the possibility that the annihilationist part of the New Wine System is biblical, so that the Bible agrees with MSLN natural theology.

Postscript

Here's the strongest case I can make for ECT within MSLN terminology: God is legitimacy, and part of that is his justice. Now, you have to be careful how you think about this. If his justice is at all seen as separate from him, then we observe the following. Justice exists to punish violations of legitimacy (of God). So if justice itself perpetuates violations of legitimacy, then it loses its legitimacy. Perpetuating hell for all eternity violates legitimacy, since those in hell are illegitimate and God must be metaphysically connected to their existence. To whatever extent justice failed to bring about God's will (failed to serve legitimacy), it would no longer ought to be, and would not function. So for ECT to occur, it can't be that justice is separate from God, or a possession of God, over which he could have authority. Justice has to be an inherent element of God, one over which he does not have any sovereignty, because it is sovereignty (God) itself (himself).

As we can see, justice is something that conflicts with God getting what he wants. Perhaps God wants justice, but also wants everything to be in harmony with himself. How can he resolve this issue? Perhaps justice is so much more valuable to him than harmony that he really wants to suffer for all eternity so that justice can be served. (God suffers whenever we do.) God is so principled, and takes us so seriously as moral agents, that he is willing to sacrifice his peace of mind, for all eternity, just to hold us accountable. He is willing to violate himself by prolonging the existence of each person in hell beyond any point at which it might serve the purpose of giving him a world which is all good, just to get the greater good of justice. Maybe he can't sin against himself in this way by himself, but he contracts out the willing of this state of affairs to evil beings, as he did before with temptation. Temptation (and the willing-to-temptation) came into the world so that we could come into tune with legitimacy, but this willing-to-ECT came in order to prolong the existence of illegitimacy. But this is acceptable because in this case, the prolonging is because justice is

being served, and justice outweighs the prolonging of sin and suffering.

Perhaps I could respond by saying that the nature of unbearability is such that for God to experience our unbearable suffering, over time the strength of the effect of the unbearability on God's will would be such as to reshape his values away from valuing justice. Or, the unbearability of God's experiencing of the existence of illegitimacy, could eventually corrode his willing of justice. This makes sense to me. However, isn't it possible that the lack of justice is unbearable to God? So then either way there would be unbearability. God would be trapped.

You could say that God could simply focus on the inherent attractiveness or life-givingness or the like of all the good in his experience, but for God to really experience what we do, God can't escape by shifting his awareness to what is positive. Could God take a break from tormenting the people in hell? (They sleep, perhaps?) But they would continue to have illegitimate hearts, dispositions that should not be. It is the awareness of "should not be" that is unbearable -- maybe Rawlette is right to some extent in saying that pain qualia are the qualia of "ought-not-to-be-ness". Whatever is truly bad about pain, as an experience, is that we can't accept it. Completely acceptable pain is not "eternal conscious torment", but is more like the sting of tolerable hot peppers (for those who like to eat such things), or sore muscles after reasonable exercise. What is unbearable is that which ought not to be, and sin (violations of legitimacy) ought not to be.

Clearly God can put up with some illegitimacy and unbearable suffering -- quite a lot. He must have some kind of patience for that. Is that patience sufficient to endure an eternity of illegitimacy and/or unbearable suffering? If it is finite, no. The prolonged unacceptability will eventually outweigh whatever finite patience that he has. But what if it is infinite? If God has infinite patience, then in his eyes sin and suffering is acceptable. He never needs to get rid of it, can tolerate it forever. At no time would he be unable to let it be part of his reality. But by definition, what should not be is unacceptable. If it can't be accepted, then at some time or other, God (legitimacy) has to do the opposite of accept it -- make it cease to exist. So legitimacy contains in it the necessity to bring about a state in which there is no illegitimacy.

So God would have to end the situation of unbearable lack of justice versus unbearable tolerance of sin and suffering. How could he go about doing this? He could annihilate the people who are illegitimate (adjust his concern for justice downward). Or he could come to find acceptable their sins. But then why keep them in hell? (I tend to think that sin is sin only if it violates the unchanging nature of God, but I won't argue for that here.) So either way, God does not permit or ordain ECT.

However, you could say that God can't change his own nature, or the

nature of what is sinful. So he could be stuck with "sin is unchangeably unacceptable, and justice is unchangeably necessary, in such a way that ECT is necessary".

But we should remember that there is an anthropic principle to creation. According to the anthropic principle, we should expect to observe the universe to be a certain way because it permits life on earth to exist, allowing us to observe anything in the first place. So, we wouldn't have been created by God if he knew that there would be such a terrible and insoluble problem in his own future, if he were to go ahead and risk our existence. (God creates us with his own extensive but finite patience in mind, so that we can arrive at the final harmony before it runs out.)

I haven't quite absorbed all of these thoughts, but I think for now I am satisfied that this shows that ECT does not follow from MSLN.

Labels: #fear, #God, #longer, #suffering God

Flat View of Experience

%flat-view-of-experience

Saturday, December 12, 2020

According to simantism, every experience, every simantic word, is spoken to you by God. Therefore, in reality, every moment, whether good, bad, or ordinary, is divine.

In evil moments we may find it impossible to see God, but it must be through God that they are spoken nonetheless. God has to speak things to us that he would rather not.

Dreams, hallucinations, and peak experiences are taken to be more divine than others, by some people. But God is not found in the experiences themselves. Experiences are like poems, and God is like their poet. You can know something about a poet through their poetry, but a poet can write a lot of different poems, which say different things. How do you really know a poet? How do you get from only knowing what someone says, to knowing what it's like to be them? We can have many experiences of God, but we know God by kinship.

Labels: #God, #idealization, #imagination, #note, #relationships

MSLN Theodicy

%msln-theodicy

Tuesday, December 15, 2020

31 October 2022: noting today that there are some things in this I should try to fix someday, but I'm taking a break from philosophy.

Addendum: Legitimacy Can't Go Back on Itself.

The argument

A theodicy is an attempt to justify God, given the evil of the world. I do think it is possible to justify the God of MSLN. Essentially, the argument goes like this:

1. God is good, absolutely.

2. Enough of us begin our existence not yet fully aligned with him.

3. We have to make choices -- real choices -- to become like him.

4. a. For these choices to exist, they have to be arranged to exist, so that we see them.

4. b. And the simantic word of "You can do wrong / choose against legitimacy" has to be spoken to us.

4. c. Enough of the time, 4. a. and 4. b. can't be done by God -- he can't tempt. He is too good, and too loving, to be able to will violations of legitimacy, and to cause us to will them.

5. So temptation must be done by beings other than God.

6. These beings are never more powerful than God, but are needed by God for their role in our salvation.

7. So these beings have bargaining power, and can negotiate a world order that is worse than what a loving God would ordain.

Now, fleshing out each point:

1. God is good, absolutely

This follows from legitimism.

2. Enough of us begin our existence not yet fully aligned with him.

Probably each of us can easily remember some time in our past when we were not aligned with God. It's likely we were born with tendencies which made us painful people, to ourselves and others. We did not do the kind of things that a completely empathic being would be able to bear forever. So we have to become like him somehow. If we see our destination as people as being in tune with him, then we must mature into that final state.

3. We have to make choices -- real choices -- to become like him.

If we are to become like him, it should be we who do so, rather than something else that determines us. So we have to be presented with situations where there is some uncertainty, where something bad seems good enough to be worth trying, or where we seem to ourselves unworthy of doing what is really good, or something else of that nature.

4. We need to be tempted, but God cannot tempt us.

Temptation is when we're put in a position where we are willed to choose to do bad. ("I will you to choose bad" -- you feel a push or pull from that willing, toward doing bad.) We have situations in our lives that seem to have been set up to tempt us. (As though the situation were saying "I will you to choose bad".) Also we can hear a voice speaking the simantic word of temptation to us. (The tempting situation needs someone to speak for it, to point out its potential.) God cannot will us to choose to do bad. He is absolutely good, legitimacy itself. He loves us too much to will that we be opposed to him through doing or being wrong.

He can't speak the word of temptation, or at least, he cannot will it. For legitimacy to will illegitimacy would be to make it legitimate. He can set up situations that tend to tempt us, but he can't will that they tempt us, and he can't set up situations that are designed to tempt us, by his own will. God often does what other beings will him to do (you can demonstrate this by making a decision and acting in the world, which he conveys to the people you interact with). Sometimes he does not approve of what he does on behalf of others. But the will had to come from

somewhere. If he allows anything to happen, it's by his will, unless someone else chooses to use the free will granted to them by him, to do something against his will.

5. So temptation must be done by beings other than God.

Other spirits can set up situations where we are tempted, and can also will the speaking of the simantic word of temptation. If there are times where spirits are not available to speak that word, for tempting situations they don't set up, it could be that God speaks it in accordance with the situation's inherent potential for temptation, according to a law that the spirits are able to bind on him.

6. These beings are never more powerful than God, but are needed by God for their role in our salvation.

These spirits are subordinate to God, and God could stop them any time he wanted. But, for us to mature, he needs them.

7. So these beings have bargaining power, and can negotiate a world order that is worse than what a loving God would ordain.

He can't force them to do what they do, or else it would be by his will that the tempting is done. So they can freely choose to not tempt us. But God needs them to tempt us, although he also fights against them, by giving us reasons to disfavor choosing wrong. Because God needs them, and they know this, they can refuse to work unless they have "good working conditions". These "conditions" may include causing suffering beyond what is needed for our maturation. The spirits (enemies of God), want to hurt him, and also know that broken expectations create doubt and decrease motivation in us. Many of us have an expectation (whether supported by our official beliefs or not) that life will go well, make sense, flow, as though a loving God were caring for us. This expectation can be broken by the gratuitous evil in the world, which can then weaken our will to do what we really want to do, and thus makes it more likely for us to choose evil instead.

God puts the spirits in a situation where their evil nature is revealed. They may not really be tempted, in the sense that they experience no inner struggle -- they simply reveal who they are, by doing evil. But for them to take on the role of tempter is a complex thing. God intends them to be tempters according to the legitimate function of a tempter in bringing us

in line with God. Their motives are more to pain him and lead us into enmity with him. And we choose how to respond to temptation. There are three stakeholders in the process of temptation: God, the tempters, and us, and each of us has our unique contribution to the question of whether we choose wrong. God does not have full control of reality. That way he can let us really exist as persons. Even though God wills us to be free, and wills the spirits to tempt us, he himself does not say that what is bad is good, as the spirits do. God does not violate his legitimacy by appointing them, in the way that he would if he tried to do what they do.

Labels: #God, #life choices, #longer, #morality, #philosophy

The Original Person

%the-original-person

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

The following is a chapter taken from How Can We Love? *that I originally wrote in 2014. Since then, my views have changed in some ways relevant to this, and I will discuss those changes at the end. I will also discuss how I find the ideas in this useful in 2020. (So if you clicked on a link to this page from somewhere else on the blog, you may find what you're looking for there most directly.)*

2014:

[Chapter title:] FREE WILL

Defined: A determination is that which decides how things will be.

Defined: A will is the part of a personal being that decides how things will be -- the personal determination.

Defined: Freedom is undetermination.

Assumed: Everything needs a determination, or is an undetermined determination, or determines itself and other things. (Perhaps there are things that are undetermined and determine nothing else, but these are left aside as they affect nothing and are affected by nothing and so are effectively not part of our universe.)

Is the universe an undetermined determination? It is said that the physical universe began with the Big Bang (or a Big Bang). That cannot be explained. It simply is. Why did the Big Bang unfold in the way that it did? How can one reason from the singularity at the inception of space and time to all the particularity of the present world? But let us say there is some rule for this. Then what explains that rule? Perhaps it is "the very nature of reality" -- then what determines that? Something just is just the way it is.

Under this story, of materialism, it seems impossible for the human will to be free. This human will emerges from the interaction of determined physical particles. Therefore it must obey the one true undetermined, the Big Bang (or if there's anything more primary than that, then that reality). Or there must be some kind of intervention, some way in which the neurons can rebel, apart from that which emerges from the Big Bang. And we don't see any physical evidence of such an intervening thing existing, and anyway, where else would that intervention have its determination

but from the one true undetermined -- the Big Bang or whatever might come before it?

But materialism may not be true.

Is there a hard logical reason to suppose that there is only one undetermined thing? It seems as though there can only be one thing that is completely free. Otherwise, some equal thing could impinge on its freedom. Of course, if that equal power had the same will, then there never would be an impingement. In that case, there would be only one will which was completely free.

Concluded, then?: There can be only one completely free will.

But could there not be a number of partially free wills? That is, wills that can be limited in scope by outside determination.

We could picture the universe as being a field in which wills or determinations interact. There could be one primary determination that brings about the existence of numerous derivative determinations without determining their natures. If one undetermined thing exists, why not a number of others, if not powerful enough to resist all influence, at least possessing some originality of determination? And then all of these free or partially free determinations could interact, to produce all the rest of the universe's development.

(Think of a board game. Each player is constrained by the rules of the game and the structure of the board, but each makes some choices as to what his or her piece does, and these pieces interact with each other to form the development of that particular playing of the game.)

But how can this primary free will give birth to more free or partially free wills? If it creates them out of some material, won't that material have to have been made the way it is by the primary free will, the creator? And thus determined by the creator. It seems a will that is built by another will cannot choose against how it's built.

But what if the primary free will makes them out of its own uncreated nature -- and that very nature entails freedom of the will? It does not create it by writing its essence down as instructions in the pages of a book, but by offering pages out of itself -- the real thing that makes a thing the way it is is its material, not its abstract definition.

The human body is like a machine, and so I suppose that God created the body like a mechanic designing and interconnecting the parts of a machine, bringing into physical reality a pattern only existing, before, in the mechanic's mind. But the will of human beings, if nothing else, cannot be created in that way. Instead, God gives himself into a limit, a finite pond washed up by an infinite ocean. (In the Hebrew of the Bible, humans

are both "made" and "created".)

Because this human free will is limited in power, it cannot rule the entire person, and so humans have only partially free will. There is an aspect of the human's nature which does come from a friend or a parent or the physical body or some accident of the weather or digestion or physical illness. Yet "the pond within" is a piece of God, and cannot be denied its "little God"-hood. It is materially free.

Can God be free? If freedom is an inexplicable quality and therefore objectionable, then which is worse, that the Big Bang has it, or that God has it? Freedom has to exist, magical as it is.

But can God impart his own material into a limit? How can an infinite being separate a finite reality from itself? The Big Bang singularity is said to exist without time and space. Can there be limits to a physical entity without time and space? No spatiotemporal limits, at least. So the singularity somehow falls out of its own infinity into limitation. This is inexplicable to me -- perhaps it is only "magical" and is explicable to some other human being. But explicable or not, it happened. And so if that is possible for the Big Bang singularity, then what would make such a move impossible for God? He could impart himself into limited regions of space-time, numerous times, and thus create us.

And so I see a way in which, if God exists, there can be human free will.

2020:

One thing that this says, that I want to bring into 2020, is that free will is something that can't have arisen from a mechanistic process. If we really do have free will (in other words, if we do anything at all, rather than forces outside us acting on us), then that capacity to be ourselves must have come directly, imparted as one would split water off from the ocean to make a tide-pool. This is a way of saying that the origin of the personal must be the personal. So we descend from some original person.

I suppose I could add the original person to the list, along with the metaphysical organism, the Speaker, and the Father of legitimism, all as names for the same being. So it might seem I ought to change "MSLN" to "OMSLN". I'm considering doing a clean-up of all the terminology that I use philosophically, if there comes a time that I consider myself to be markedly more ready to try to promote MSLN, but until then, I will not change "MSLN", because of the work involved in doing so.

I don't keep up very carefully on cosmology, so either a) what I wrote above about the Big Bang might not be what people thought then or b) it might not be what people think now.

In the past, I wanted to defend the description of God that included

"actually infinite" in its list of properties. I don't currently think that the description of God needs to include "actually infinite", and I am not sure that there is such a thing as actual infinity. I would tend to think that there is not (nothing in our experience is actually infinite) -- except in the case of everlastingness (e.g. processes which have always lasted a finite amount of time but which never stop increasing in duration). But I have not fully explored the question yet, and probably should in some other post.

"The real thing that makes a thing the way it is is its material, not its abstract definition." is an interesting statement. If I want to defend my past usage, I would say that what I probably meant was "abstract definition" (formal cause?) does make something the way it is, but "material" (material cause?) is the truer root of what makes a thing the way it is. I think in context of *How Can We Love?*, the emphasis on spiritual material over constructedness is fitting. *How Can We Love?* is about change in material, in part.

I think this charitable interpretation has some evidence in its favor from the original text, in the case where humans are implied to have been both "made" and "created". If God both made and created us, perhaps by "creating" us he was putting us into the finite ponds, and by "making" us he was making our bodies (including our brains and that which our brains determine about who we are).

What makes us "really" who we are? Our constructedness? The many layers of mechanism which determine many of the facts of our life and how we behave and appear to others? Or the fact that we are free, that we exist at all as persons?

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If I title this post "The Original Person", then maybe I ought to give some thought as to what this argument can tell us about God.

A short way to put this is: We are persons, not wills and consciousnesses. Persons have wills and consciousnesses. We do things, we make decisions, knowingly, as opposed to being forced to by mechanistic forces. We exist, as persons. We exist, as partially undetermined beings. It is in our undeterminedness that *we* do things. So the question is not "free will", but "free persons". Free persons descend from a free person. They can't be fully determined by anything else, so their undetermination must come from undetermined personhood.

We get the whole of personality from a personal source. People are different -- have different "constructednesses" or are "made" different ways. But what we all have in common is our material. The original person is a person in the most minimal sense, has will, consciousness, and preferences. He has a constructedness which differs from each of us, but whatever is necessarily a part of all personal being can be found in him. I'm not sure at

the moment what, if anything, to add to "will, consciousness, and preference" among the foundation of personhood, but perhaps there are more features to be added.

Labels: #God, #longer, #what is a person?

The Ordinary vs. the Ontological

%the-ordinary-vs-ontological

Thursday, December 17, 2020

Epistemic status: provisional, may break something else I've already said.

If you come to this post from a link, it may be helpful to read this part from the end first:

> I tend to use "ontologistic" and "ordinaristic" to apply to the uses of "ontology" and "ordinary" in this post.

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Let's say you have a balloon. You can see it in front of you, drifting toward the floor (since you filled it with your breath and not helium). It is round and has a certain latex-y texture. It has a particular color -- perhaps it is red. You can kick it and it will fly in the air, then drift down to the floor. If you put it in the freezer, it will shrink.

And you could go on interacting with this balloon, yourself, using your own senses.

And that is all the balloon is. A round object, a thing. It is physical and you interact with it.

Arguably, this may be closer to how people related to balloons or the like in pre-modern cultures.

But if you ask a modern person what a balloon is, they leave the above world at some point. The above could be called the ordinary. And then they enter the world of the ontological.

What is a balloon *really*? Well, it's made up of molecules, both solid and gas. Has anyone seen a molecule? No, except in electron microscope images. So they've seen the images, but have they seen the molecules? No. But we take it on faith that balloons are made up of molecules. Well, the fact that balloons shrink in the freezer has to do with there being little molecules flying around inside the balloon, which slow down and don't push as hard against the latex when the temperature goes down. So some of us feel strongly that there is so much reason for molecules to exist, they do so much explanatorily, that that's good enough for them to exist. But in ordinary life, we never experience them.

When you look at a tiny speck on a slide, with your unaided eyes, and then look at an ordinary lab microscope pointed at the same spot, and see something of the same shape, but much more detailed, are you looking at the same tiny speck? You make a powerfully persuasive inference that you are, but it's not really the same thing. Likewise with a telescope. You could walk down a road, looking at a landmark with a telescope, and see that the landmark gets more and more similar to the magnified image you saw from a distance, as you approach. But when you get to the landmark, no matter how similar the image is, it's not the same thing at all. But you feel a strong poetry, like with the microscope, that convinces you that all along you were looking at the landmark that you now see up close, through the telescope's lenses. Maybe that poetic, inferential-linking phenomenon is so natural in these cases that even a pre-modern person, using a telescope or microscope, would feel it without needing to be taught it in any way, although they might not find it credible without being taught, when told that little particles are inside a balloon, called "molecules".

Once I've heard a convincing ontological explanation, I look at the balloon differently. But the balloon never changed. And while the explanation is convincing, it does not really mean that the things it posits by way of explanation, such as molecules, exist. They are just a helpful theoretical concept for understanding balloons (and electron microscope read-outs). The ontological is the world of poetry. And you can see how both literary poetry and philosophical and scientific theorizing expand our understanding of ordinary objects and experiences.

When we ask "what is consciousness?" we are asking an ontological question. But consciousness itself just is its contents. These contents vary for each person. I have to pick a specific example. Perhaps one of the few things I have in common with you, the reader, is that we are both reading sentences such as "These contents vary for each person", the very ones I am typing. You see the letters as well as I do. That is consciousness. Consciousness isn't some kind of filmstock. What is is what we are actually conscious of. But it's useful to talk about consciousness as a material, when constructing philosophical poetry.

I think that the ordinary is all that there is. But philosophy (and other forms of poetry) are helpful in understanding the true nature of the ordinary. So I think proofs of the existence of God, although ontological, can help a person to understand that what they are seeing in the ordinary is God. We can't see molecules, but we can see our experience bodies, and understand how they are spoken to us by God, that we are experiencing God when we experience them.

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Counterpoint:

Maybe you can see a molecule "noetically", with the eyes of belief. And then it it is part of the ordinary. It got into the ordinary through the poetry of scientific reasoning. Perhaps we can perceive philosophical and scientific theorizing in its own independent world, through noetic "eyes" or "ears". It could be that we can alter balloons by understanding about molecules, because we can perceive the molecules in them noetically, which changes what the balloons are to us. Poetry is what links interpretations, a form of noetic perception, to sensory objects. The ontological is the world where we imagine the underpinnings of reality, and the world of the imagination is real, and some of the things that we imagine are fitting to apply to what we sense. When we pursue the ontological well, we find what is fitting to apply to the sensory.

All existence is ordinary, first-hand. But some of it says that it connects to certain things when it doesn't. And that is where we get our concept of non-existence from. A noetic thing (an imagined object or person) can be said to be unreal if it does not connect to the things it is said to connect to. A conceivable thing can be real in a way that bears more, or less, fruit, that which speaks to us as persons, with the voice of limitation or enhancement.

The ordinary is life as you experience it, not just sensory objects, or sensory objects plus noetic objects. The balloon is the balloon as you interpret it. Sometimes it's really just a balloon, has no latex or molecules or even any gases, although you can turn your noetic eye to them in other moments or contexts. Just a thing you can kick, or that your friend can pop, startling you.

You, as a person, experience life, spoken to you simantically. In earlier drafts of these ideas, I thought to call the ordinary the simantic, but thought it was too confusing and question-begging. I think it's good to have a way of talking about what is not "ontological" without committing the person speaking to simantism. But what I want to say is that reality is simantic, over and above being ordinary, and "ordinary" is a kind of scaffolding to reach "simantic".

I tend to use "ontologistic" and "ordinaristic" to apply to the uses of "ontology" and "ordinary" in this post. I don't 100% like making up these particular new words, but this is also done to avoid confusion.

Labels: #ontology, #philosophy

The Original Person Theory Meets Consciousness Monism

%the-original-person-theory-meets

Thursday, December 17, 2020

According to the original person theory, we are made out of the material of an original person. But then, each experience body is made fresh each day, ending when we lose consciousness, being created anew when we regain it. That's what we would expect if everything is consciousness (the view called "consciousness monism"). We imagine that there's some kind of consciousness material, which is in separate blobs, and we are each a blob, and we, the blobs, come in and out of existence when we gain and lose consciousness. This is an ontologistic view. We find ontology trustworthy, so we want to apply it to experience, and thus we imagine the consciousness material. And this ontology is so trustworthy that we don't want to break it when we try to bring in a new theory, like the original person theory. Maybe we have to break it, but we would like to not have to do that.

So then, is it the case that God creates a new person every time we come into consciousness? A new free will? As though the constructedness of our past is not really us. If not, then it would seem that we have a free will that is made up every day, and a constructedness that is not us. So where in all this are we? How do we exist?

Some of our constructedness affects the kinds of decisions we can make in the future. And some of our constructedness can be attributed to choices we made in the past. So if we look at things through the ontologistic lens of consciousness monism, a person exists as a person because their past is a partial reflection of their free choices, their past is remembered by God, and they are constructed in each new day according to their pasts.

Labels: #ontology, #philosophy, #what is a person?

Parts of a Simantic Word

%parts-of-simantic-word

Sunday, December 20, 2020

Epistemic status: Provisional, may break something I've already written.

The way to look at simantism is that humans personally relate to thought- and experience-objects, called simantic words. That's the foundation of experience and thus of existence.

Everything, both thought- and experience-objects, can be experienced. That is how we know about them. So all objects have phenomena. Likewise, all objects have some kind of concept that tells us what they are, defining the boundaries of what they are. A concept gives a unity to phenomena. And each of us interprets each thing that we see. Because of us, because of each observer, the thing observed means what it does. Meant reality, reality that is meaningful, is what we actually experience.

A simantic word is a union of phenomena, concept, and meaning. How could all these things be one thing?

Step back and consider a more familiar entity, a physical object. If I go for a walk in my neighborhood on a breezy day, I can look up at a palm tree, the leaves of which are rustling in the breeze. I can see the leaves rustling, and hear them. I somehow know that the sound and sight belong to the same thing.

I have a direct knowledge that sight and sound go together. Similarly, I can have direct knowledge that the concept and meaning of a thing and its phenomena go together.

So consider the rustling palm leaves as a simantic word. When I look at it, I have a kind of feeling or inner map. The rustling leaves occupy a place in perhaps a hierarchy or web of inner relations. I might intuit things I could do with the palm leaves. I might feel myself to be in some kind of intuitive relation with the leaves. I might know the fact of what kind of palm tree this is -- a foreign one, often planted in my city for convenience. That knowledge of the fact is tacit, contained in the meaning, and at any moment can be the bridge to the explicit thought of the fact. These, and perhaps other things, constitute the meaning of the leaves. To an extent, the meaning depends on me, on who I am.

There are connections to what is unseen, in the meaning of the leaves. We see the leaves and connect to things that are not apparent.

Whatever it takes to define the word "leaves" or "rustling" or "palm" or

"rustling palm leaves" or "tree" or "breeze" (and so on and so forth) is the concept, of leaves, rustling, palm, rustling palm leaves, tree, breeze and thus of the specific rustling branch that I see and hear.

Concept and meaning may not be clearly demarcated. Perhaps the concept is what the word means to (more or less) everyone, or what it ought to mean to everyone, while meaning is what the word means to me (or in your case, to you).

The concept is both a perception of connections and a real relationship in the world of ideas. And ideas really do connect to persons (which are the fundamental units of reality). But we do not always see the real relationship in the world of ideas and to persons. So we can be mistaken, though we see things with so much solidity. A simantic word can be untrustworthy, if its concept or meaning does not connect properly. But every simantic word is as it appears to us.

The concept defines a thing, bringing into a thing what is not visible. So, for instance, I will never really see you. I will see a representation of you, a subset of you, and my interpretation of you, your meaning to me. But the concept "you" entails you as you are in yourself. (You may not even see you as you are in yourself.) But when I say "you", I am referring to you, not to the representations I see. It's entailed in the concept, which I do participate in.

What if I see a mirage? Is it a pool of water? I might think so from a distance. Is there a "thing-in-itself" for a mirage? Certainly. But it's not a pool of water. I can be wrong about the concept of a simantic word. I see the appearance of the pool of water, and it either turns into something that can get me wet, or it turns into nothing, depending on whether all along it had been a pool of water or a mirage. The "thing-in-itself" of the pool is a pool. The "thing-in-itself" of the mirage is a mirage. But I really was seeing a pool of water, before it turned out it was a mirage.

A concept is itself something that has phenomena associated with it, and which has meaning to us. It is a simantic word within an overall simantic word. Or we can apprehend concepts by themselves, definitions without phenomena attached to them. The simantic view is that a thing is a thing if it has meaning. The *thing* has meaning. It has to be one thing to be meaningful. So it is with concepts.

I can see the rustling leaves if my eyes are open and they are nearby. By seeing them, I perceive their meaning. But I can also see the meaning of the leaves, or connect with the concept of that particular tree's leaves, through memory or imagination. It's possible to see only part of a word: to only hear it, only see it, only sense or see its meaning, only sense or see its concept. But it is all one thing.

A concept may say one thing: "I connect to a certain experience" and not

deliver that experience. True concepts are trustworthy. God is the one who causes concepts to correspond with experiences. If I connect with you, it is because God speaks you to me, in accordance with my concept of you, your meaning to me. My concept, your meaning to me, adjusts to fit the experiences I have. So God trains me to find certain things meaningful in a certain way.

I could be wrong that any other human person exists. Certainly it's easy to see how a particular person we think we know can turn out to be a mirage, and not a pool of water. I think I live in an approximation of reality -- and it's all approximations, speakings, except for the existence of the one who speaks my approximation to me, and me, as I relate to him. On the deepest level of reality, we are each alone with God.

Labels: #epistemology, #God, #philosophy

Self-Validating Things

%self-validating-things

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

Epistemic status: provisional.

If you see an object, whether physical or noetic, it ought to be, on some level. Nobody can argue with that "ought". Is there a reason for it to be valid enough to exist? Is it its own reason, or is there some other reason? We know that things are valid, but how is it that that validity is justified? If we know that things are valid, they must be justified as valid, but how?

What would it mean for an object to validate itself? It would have to be seen in our eyes as valid due to itself. Or, it would have to perform some kind of act to make itself valid. It might say "I am valid" in some language, knowing what it was saying. That is how it would convince us it was valid, whether in itself or having made itself so. The language in which it spoke might not be one of conscious words, heard or thought, although in some cases it could be.

In that case, it would have to know itself. And part of knowing yourself is knowing your relationship with all the things that are connected to you. Everything is noetically or sensorily connected to all other things in the universe. Just like we know that we feel a tiny amount of gravity from stars that are light-years away, so there is a tiny amount of relevance to each of us of any action that could affect us or be affected by us in any way, even very indirectly. There are noetic relationships between all thinkable things. Part of what makes "being" have its exact connotation are all the things that exist. So to be able to say, in an absolute way, that you are valid, and be right, requires that you know everything there is to know. If you say that you are right without knowing that, that saying is not reliable enough to really establish your validity.

In the case that an object has to be seen in our eyes as valid, rather than it itself telling us it is valid, some other being could say "that object is valid". But the other being would have to know everything there is to know, in order to say that.

What would it take to create validity, to create a truly valid thing out of nothing? Who is it who deserves to say "this ought to be so?" We can imagine it being valid to call God's will morally monstrous despite him having created morality itself. So, what kind of person is valid? Legitimacy itself is valid. Legitimacy is what self-validates, and from its own validity, it validates all things.

Labels: #epistemology, #note, #ontology

A Bridge Between Simantism and Legitimism

%a-bridge-between-simantism-and

Tuesday, December 29, 2020

In simantism, it is assumed that whenever you experience something, it is as it appears to you. The sunset that you see really is beautiful. That sunset can turn into an ugly thing, or you can come to believe that it was ugly all along. What you experienced was beautiful, and referred to a deeper simantic word that might serve you beauty or ugliness in the future, altering your understanding of the deeper simantic word.

If you perceive a law, you might be uncertain as to whether it is valid or not. For instance, in some city, there is an ordinance against people sleeping on the streets. This was passed in an above-board way, according to the city's charter. But we might still wonder if it was valid. On the one hand, that is something that is hard on the people who have nowhere else to sleep. On the other hand, a city only has so many resources to deal with people who sleep on the streets. That city may have had some problems with people who slept on the street, so they threw up their hands and said "Let's ban sleeping on the streets". But then, how can we let ourselves think that we only have limited resources, when it comes to human well-being? Shouldn't we try harder? But then, maybe that's true, but maybe sometimes you just can't.

I could think through each of these considerations and as I went through the list go back and forth as to whether the ordinance was valid. Certainly it's valid as far as being legal, since it got on the books in a legal way. But the deeper validity, of whether it is just, I don't know. But I can try to form an opinion, and whether I try hard or barely try, I will perceive the law as either basically just or basically unjust. I will see it as being valid just for existing, and sometimes as a just law, as well.

The law that I experience in any moment is either just or unjust. It really is that, just like a sunset really is beautiful or not. I am always 100% right about that direct perception, even if that perception ends up betraying me. Maybe I think the law is just, but then talk to someone who sleeps on the streets, who breaks my sense that it is just, a breaking which to me is a kind of betrayal, something that is an insult to trust. Or I think the law is unjust, but then talk to the city council and find that opinion of unjustness (that incontrovertibly true experience of the law as unjust) as being untrustworthy, after I hear their perspective.

So then legitimism asks "what could possibly make something really be valid?" Can things validate themselves? Can things be created or built to be valid, and if so, how?

Labels: #morality, #note, #philosophy

Simantism, Part 2

%simantism-part-2

Thursday, December 31, 2020

We get more meaning from things than we put in. I think this is true of everything we encounter, but we really notice it with certain things that speak to us strongly and deeply. What we experience is that *they* speak to us, just as that *they* are meaningful. They tend to speak to us in a way that has something to do with who we are. Because they really *are* in accordance with who we are, they can speak to us. They are meaningful, and they use this platform to speak meaning to us.

For instance, suppose you hear that if you donate a kidney, it can save the life of somebody -- a stranger. This idea speaks to you. Because of who you are, the idea of donating a kidney is appealing, rather than disturbing or uninteresting. But the idea itself has vocal strength, it can speak to you strongly, beyond the energy you have already. So it can motivate you, in ways that you wouldn't have already been motivated.

Sometimes, having gained entry by meaning something in tune with who you are, such an idea (or other simantic word) can speak to you so strongly that you change. You are strongly tempted (or anti-tempted) to choose to see things its way. There is a lot of power in the things that can speak to us.

I think that all the time, this speech is the speech of a personal being to a personal being. Sometimes this is more clear than other times. We might see it more clearly when something speaks to us in a very personal way. How could an experiential word mean something so personal if it wasn't spoken by a person? We can take as an analogy for simantic meaning (a personal relating with something) the finding of semantic meaning (decoding of written or spoken symbolic language). I can imagine a book in the Library of Babel having wonderful poetry in my native language, but most of what is in the Library of Babel is meaningless. A typical book from the Library would be like reading pages and pages of mashed keys on the keyboard. If we tried to get semantic (rather than simantic) meaning, we would get nothing from it. The bits that made any sense might give us whiplash -- words could arise by chance, followed by other unrelated words. Somewhere in that Library there is a book that gives some kind of interpretive key to the nonsense that is before me, but it could take more than my whole life to find that key, and in the meantime I would have had to go through oceans of nonsense in all the books I search through, with no keys provided for them.

There are simantic words that are like books in the Library of Babel, things that give us a kind of whiplash, or that blank out our ability to assign a level of importance to them, to integrate them into the flows of our lives as ourselves, as personal beings. But most simantic words far more resemble novels or instruction books or phone books or newspapers. We find those writings meaningful because they were written by people. So simantically speaking, we find ourselves in something more akin to Wikipedia or the Internet as a whole, rather than a Library of Babel. It looks like we live in a world spoken by a person, as though the key to speaking to personal being is to understand it yourself, as a person.

If we were very lucky and found a book of lost greatness in the Library of Babel, some great poem, the poem wouldn't mean anything to us unless we understood the language it was written in. That language is where most of the meaning of the book is stored. We would have had to learn the language.

And in order for children to learn language, language must speak to them. They have to be drawn to the sounds and the gestures by which their parents try to teach them. There is a personal communication, a wordless dialogue which draws us to learning words.

The wordless dialogue might be identified as "deep calling to deep", that which underlies, for instance, the semantic words "I love you" spoken by someone like Boaz to someone like Ruth. "I love you" from the Library of Babel does not mean the same as "I love you" from Boaz to Ruth. The words "I love you" mean something coming from the dictionary, and they are useful in a general sense. But their real meaning comes from what "I" and "love" and "you" mean specifically between a given pair of people. Because they mean something specific, fleshed out by personal relation and intention between two discrete personal beings, there is a wordless dialogue between Boaz and Ruth, and it is actually spoken by God, is God's poem for each of them, the poem in which the two characters are them, saying "I love you" one to the other. They choose to say "I love you", but it is God who speaks the depths between them. Perhaps this expression of the wordless dialogue really originates with Boaz, but Ruth can hear it in many other contexts, the basic root or silent embodiment of other poems, unrelated to him. For our part, as liberal modern people, the word "democracy" speaks to us, or as humanists, the word "empathy". These semantic words do so because they are representatives of the underlying simantic words of democracy and empathy, the life realities in the world. How can democracy speak to us personally? How can empathy? The wordless dialogue is with a person, who speaks through our ideas to us.

We are spoken to by the things that are "deep calling to deep", but even with mundane simantic words like trash cans or bricks, or whatever is on your desk, the words being spoken have a personal origin, similar to how if you were married to someone named Sam, there would be something

spousal and Sam-like when they say "I put the food in the refrigerator". We can tell when persons are speaking to us. Even before we know much about our spouse, before they become our spouse although not before they become who they are, we can hear their voice. So bricks and trash cans are not necessarily persons in their own right, but as words are extensions of the personality of the Speaker.

The set of all existing things is something to which we can relate. That simantic word refers to all things that exist. It can speak to us. How can it do that unless somehow it is a person? The set of all things can be a person if all things are conscious, parts of one person, who includes all experience into one complex of experiences, as is the case with the metaphysical organism.

Labels: #communication, #God, #longer, #love, #meaning, #philosophy, #relationships

Suffering For Lives

%suffering-for-lives

Thursday, December 31, 2020

I get the sense that in our culture, serious voluntary suffering is unacceptable. However, there is at least one exception. When you are suicidal, you are required to keep living. It is socially unacceptable that you die, even though dying would end your suffering. You are expected to endure however much suffering you have to in order to save something of great value, your own biological life.

Maybe that's the only thing that really matters to us -- human life. But specifically, the life of humans we know personally. We might value all human lives, in principle, but where we say in an effective way "human life matters" (by urging people to keep living no matter what) traces out where, effectively, we encourage human life. We tend to only know people personally whom we like (we might sometimes also hate them, simultaneously, but we must like them to get close). So that's our effective moral circle. We are champions of love and care for people close to us whom we like. And we encourage people who are close to us, whom we like, to do their best to live forever, to put up with whatever awful feelings they have to to make that happen. That is a real commitment we call for.

But if we are altruists, we should care about distant people, or even all sentient beings. So then, if we are really altruists, we should be willing to suffer as much as we would have to avoid our own suicide, if that suffering is necessary to remain true to our altruism.

And if we are theists, we should care about God, and all that he cares about. Then, if we are really theists, we should be willing to suffer as much as we would have to avoid our own suicide, if that suffering is necessary to remain true to our theism.

Altruism and theism don't necessarily call for us to burn ourselves out, or to sacrifice our biological lives (although when truly called-for, they do). Altruism and theism are ways of life, ways of seeing things, sensitivities, the ability to take into account the existence of all people, or all sentient beings, or God. Usually they recommend that we be most productive in the long term, which usually means that we should practice moderation in pouring ourselves out, and that should be our default assumption.

We each have a biological life, which we are expected to fight bitterly to preserve. It doesn't matter how hard you work, or how little you work, with the time you have, you are expected to preserve your biological life. That basic life is what you fight for. Altruists and theists have additional

lives. No matter how much or little you work as an altruist or theist (depending on the resources you have available), altruism is a life, and theism is a life, and these can end if we are not careful. These lives are really others' lives, of God and other sentient beings, and for their sake it is acceptable to suffer, just as it is acceptable to struggle to not end our own biological lives.

(God loses a life each time one of us is lost. So that he does not have to lose lives, each of ours, we should hold onto theism.)

Labels: #altruism, #courage, #death, #God, #life choices, #note, #suffering God

2020 to 2021

%2020-to-2021

Friday, January 1, 2021

Review of 2020:

In the first half of 2020, I was taking a break from blogging that I had begun at the end of 2019. In that time, I studied Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, about three or four books for each (also a bit on Taoism). When I got back into the blog, I worked on MSLN. *The Future of Beauty* was written toward the end of 2018 or the beginning of 2019, but it took until 2020 to edit it fully and release it.

In 2020, Scott Alexander took his blog down for fear of doxxing, so I looked around for other things to read and found the EA Forum. I read a lot about AI, and got into some of the questions related to longtermism. I learned some EA epistemic and communication norms.

Preview of 2021:

I have three reviews that I want to finish: (*X-Risk*, *The Feeling of Value*, and a population ethics reading list, all three of which come to me out of effective altruism. When I finish enough of them, I intend to start reading and reviewing one of George Berkeley's books, as well as more of the EA reading lists.

I don't have a very firm plan for where I'm going in 2021, except to develop MSLN more.

Labels: #news and meta

Christian Reasons For Expanding the Moral Circle

%christian-reasons-for-expanding-moral

Tuesday, January 5, 2021

Writing status: This is a little out-of-hand and probably raises some questions I'm not aware of.

The moral circle is the set of all beings to which we consider ourselves to have moral obligations. Something can be inside, or outside, one's moral circle, a member, or not, of the set of beings to which we consider ourselves to have moral obligations. The reason for why something belongs in the moral circle is because it has feelings, especially that it suffers, in such a way that we need to respond to its circumstances. Generally, we need to respond when something threatens a feeling being's well-being. (This is how "moral circle" is generally used, and that is how I'll be using the concept in this post. Conceivably, we could have moral obligations for other reasons.)

As we come to really take into account the existence of feeling beings, we include them in our moral circle. So for instance, we might consider that the impairment of well-being that happens in distant countries of people we will never know personally is just as bad as that which happens to us or to people we care about personally, in our own lives. Therefore, if we are morally obligated to help the people in our own lives, we should help the people far away if we can, all things being equal.

A Christian could counter-argue that righteousness comes by faith, and that the point of the gospel is that it is not you who save yourself by your works, but rather God who saves you by his grace. It could be argued that to a Christian, moral obligation does not exist. We live in the freedom of being covered by Jesus' blood, shed on the cross.

Is it really Christian to say "I don't have to worry about anything in secular ethics. I don't rely on reason. I rely on grace. I am OK."?

It may be the case that salvation is only by grace, apart from works. I think this is an area that is nuanced. Perhaps forgiveness of sins is by grace, but repentance is up to us. I think that makes sense, and maybe I will find that the Bible supports it, when I do another study of the Bible to check against the religious philosophy I've been working on. I think something like that is what the New Wine System teaches, according to its developer.

But I will grant for the sake of argument that perhaps grace saves, and "saves" means "does everything that it takes to give a person eternal life". In that case, if your only concern is salvation, then great. As soon as you do whatever it is you need to in order to receive that grace (or even, nothing at all, if that's all that's required), then you can live your life as you please. You can be as moral as you feel like, and no more moral than is reasonable, in your eyes.

You certainly care about your own well-being. You are covered by grace, and have received the gift of salvation, in which you rest. But do you love God? Do you have the same heart as he has for people? Can you love someone without caring about what they care about? If you're the kind of person who only cares about your own salvation, do you think God is pleased with you? Do you think God can leave you in that state? So God will eventually teach you to care like he does. If grace saves, then you were always saved. But God will make you care like he does.

Does God love you? Does he love people far away? If he loves you, why not people far away? Are you better than them, more deserving of a life of comfort and wealth than they are? It's true that there is some nuance to this. The material wealth of the West isn't all it's cracked up to be. Material wealth doesn't always make life better. And a certain amount of impaired well-being is an acceptable part of life. But some people suffer so much for being poor that there isn't really that much nuance in their case. Suffering itself beyond a certain threshold is impaired well-being, and God suffers with their suffering, just as he does with yours. If you can alleviate your own suffering, you tend to do that. So why not alleviate others' suffering? You love God by alleviating your own suffering, and you love him by alleviating that of distant people. This is the love of a healer healing, or a servant washing someone's feet.

So far, I haven't brought up the Bible. I can't provide a rigorous survey right now of the Bible's teachings on economic sin. But I can give some basic thoughts that are suggestive. In general, I know that many references to caring for the poor can be found in the Bible. The Old Testament prophets talked about that. Also in the New Testament, James speaks strongly against people who hold onto their wealth, causing the deprivation of those who work for them. One could say that James is no better than Paul, who says "salvation is by grace through faith, apart from works", but then, is Paul any better than James? I don't think that "salvation is by grace through works" means "we don't need to do the right thing" (not even Paul believed that), but if "grace" is taken to mean "we don't need to do works", then supposing that we need the words of Jesus to settle the dispute we might see between James and Paul, what does he say?

Luke 10:

25 Behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"

27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

28 He said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live."

29 But he, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

30 Jesus answered, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, 34 came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.' 36 Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?"

37 He said, "He who showed mercy on him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The people in Jesus' audience in 1st-century Palestine couldn't have been held accountable for people in the New World, and perhaps not for people in China. But nowadays, we can encounter people who are distant from us. We hear that they are metaphorically lying by the side of the road, and we can choose to be neighbors to them, or not. Do we want to do what Jesus said? Do we care what he thinks and feels? You could argue that

technically, the priest and the Levite could have inherited eternal life, because the man by the side of the road was someone they didn't have to be a neighbor to, so he wasn't. But if we are to love God with all our beings, as Jesus and the lawyer agreed were the way to eternal life, then we have to be interested in what Jesus wanted.

It's interesting to note that the lawyer thinks (and Jesus doesn't contradict) that to do good to someone is to show mercy to them. Altruism can have different psychological fuels, like how you can have a gas stove, or a wood stove, which itself can burn different kinds of wood. If we have mercy, when we recognize that the people around us do not love like Jesus wanted us to love, and that we do not either, we do not judge.

At the same time, if we want eternal life, we need to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. These commands are ones that we ourselves can keep, if we have time. So the New Wine System teaches that we have time in which to learn after death, before we are brought before God to be with him forever. Someday we must become the kind of people who really do have the heart of God.

Some might say things changed at the cross, though. Maybe much of Jesus' teaching can be set aside, since he taught it to people before his death. Once he died, his death covers our sins, so we no longer need to take his living words as literally. How much actually changed at the cross, though? Consider these two passages from Matthew:

Matthew 5 (Jesus speaking):

> 17 "Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill. 18 For most certainly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least commandments and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

And Matthew 22:

> 34 But the Pharisees, when they heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, gathered themselves together. 35 One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, testing him. 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?"

> 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Jesus says, in Matthew 5, that there is a law that lasts until heaven and earth pass away (which means, we are still under it). Is this the law of Moses? Or is this the law of loving God with all your being, and your neighbor as yourself? This might be hinted by the Matthew 22 quote. Or is it some other law?

It seems like another candidate might be "profess to be a Christian and approve of the people in your life". Grace says "You aren't any better than anybody else -- you need grace -- so approve of other people. And faith is how you're saved -- just think that you trust God, and you do." That sort of sounds like it's a subset of "love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself". Certainly disapproving of people can hurt people sometimes.

Note that the "profess and approve" (arguably grace-and-faith-based) formula does fairly well with leading you to love your neighbor as yourself, but not as well with leading you to love God with all your being. The profession is only a beginning compared to loving God with all your being.

Because "profess and approve" is easier, it's popular, and the kind of thing people like to believe. It's an easy way to get people to like you. Just say "Let's go easy on each other and ourselves and approve of each other, professing faith in God", and you are more likely to make friends than if, among your prosocial "love your neighbor as yourself" (which might win you some popularity points, since it causes you to benefit people), you also say "love God with all your being". "Profess and approve" is a version of Christianity that the universal culture would select for. (To the extent that "love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself" is popular and selected for, it tends to downplay loving God in any way that threatens to take away from human well-being, and so it tends to be a different flavor of the same appealing-to-humans thing.)

But the law that lasts to the end of heaven and earth that is actually offered by Jesus might be "love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself", but he did not set up the "profess and approve" law (or the "love God with all your being which means nothing other than loving your neighbor a lot" law). He didn't want us to judge, and yet he himself did not approve of everyone and everything. He told people he was being kind to to stop sinning. Professing allegiance to Jesus certainly

counts for something, and something like approving of other people (not judging them, as Jesus commanded) also counts for something, and they could be considered part of the "love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself" law. They are an entry point to the bigger and fuller law of love. (And so can the "love people" laws that are used as substitutes for "love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself".)

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Many people, among those who "profess and approve" and those who "love people", if asked, would identify as those who love God. If we identify as those who love God, then why shouldn't we care about how he feels about his other children? To live up to our calling as lovers of God -- as children of God -- we should care about people who live far away from us. There are practical limitations to our ability to help people far away, but they are not absolute, and within them we should do something.

However, is this exactly the same thing as "expanding the moral circle" in a secular sense? Is this really moral obligation, and is this something done as a response to the impaired well-being of another feeling being? In Jesus' parable of the Samaritan helping someone he runs into on the side of the road, the action taken is definitely in response to the injury of a feeling being.

As to moral obligation, if we want eternal life, we must obey God's commands to love. You could look at that as moral obligation -- "we must" -- or not -- "we must only if we want eternal life and" -- presumably -- "we want God's approval" -- he set up the incentive to make things be the way he wanted them. But God's approval is the approval of legitimacy itself, and what is required to satisfy legitimacy is morally obliged, since morality is what legitimacy wants.

We find ourselves unwilling to say "thus says God" in moral areas (rely on God's commands to love as the foundation of moral obligation) and tend to rely on secular morality instead. Maybe it sounds overbearing to bring God into the picture. So instead we rely on the secular psychology of morality that relies on instinct and social pressure to produce feelings of moral obligation. But with God as the basis of moral obligation, there can be such a thing as realistic absolute standards -- grace allowing for the attainment of uncompromising holiness. Whereas, godless morality throws out wild absolutes with no way to live up to them -- so people become moral anti-realists. God, who is legitimacy itself (/himself), the truth, requires us to be aligned with him -- being aligned with legitimacy is itself to have fulfilled moral obligation. So I think we are morally obligated due to other's impaired well-being, but that moral obligation doesn't work the same in the context of God, as in the context of godlessness.

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What about non-human animals? Extending the moral circle to non-human animals makes sense from a secular perspective. Materialists tend to want to do that, because animal brains aren't sufficiently different from ours in most (or all?) cases for us to think that they don't suffer consciously. From an immaterialist standpoint, we may think that animal bodies that appear before us only appear to have consciousnesses (similarly, we may think that other people are only p-zombies). But ordinaristically, we see that people are conscious and so are non-human animals. Even if we are sticklers for immaterialist ontology, ignoring the ordinary, we should have uncertainty that non-human animal bodies do not have animal consciousnesses associated with them, in the way that each of our own bodies are associated with each of our consciousnesses. This uncertainty should keep us from disregarding them as feeling beings.

Similarly, it makes sense to have some sense of uncertainty that artificial intelligences that behave sufficiently like humans are not conscious.

But what does the Bible say? There's nothing in the Bible about artificial intelligences, unless you expand what you mean by that to include organizations and states, which do not seem to be regarded as having personhood in a literal sense (although they can in a symbolic sense, as in prophecy). As to animals, again, this is not an exhaustive survey, but in Jonah 4, it says:

> 10 Yahweh said, "You have been concerned for the vine, for which you have not labored, neither made it grow; which came up in a night and perished in a night. 11 Shouldn't I be concerned for Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred twenty thousand persons who can't discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also many animals?"

This lends some weight to the thought that God cares about animals. From Jesus (Matthew 10):

> 29 "Aren't two sparrows sold for an assarion coin? Not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. 30 But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Therefore don't be afraid. You are of more value than many sparrows."

God cares more about humans, but vs. 31 wouldn't be as reassuring if we thought that God didn't care about the value of sparrows at all.

Why might God care about animals, but not as much as about humans? I'm not really sure. One possibility is that humans are sons and daughters of God, while animals are no more nor less than animals. God is more akin to us than he is to animals (the Bible says that we are made in his image, but

does not say this of non-human animals).

I have thought before that animals may be persons -- do I think they are persons in the full-fledged sense that we are? In the sense that we say "I think, therefore I am", the way that we know ourselves as people, the full meaning behind the "I" that we speak there? Or are they only persons in the sense that they are consciousnesses with wills and preferences? Is there a difference between the latter and the former? If there is, then animals can still suffer, trust and have their preferences thwarted, and yet not be full persons.

Animals may not have free will in the same way that we do, at least to the extent of not being capable of moral reasoning, and thus are not capable of really loving God, really choosing him, or any other being, for that matter. When animals love, they have no choice, perhaps. It is also possible to look at lives and persons as different in terms of valuing them. So it's valuable to God to make animal lives go well (e.g., not be unremitting suffering), but animals themselves, as persons or proto-persons, are not as valuable. (The contents of these last two paragraphs are speculations that I may revisit later.)

From all this, I feel somewhat safe saying that the Bible supports eliminating gratuitous animal suffering, such as that caused by factory farming or cruelty to animals. We have enough uncertainty about whether God cares about animal suffering (importantly, it's hard for us to rule out that his care does not include caring about their suffering) that in cases where we don't really need to cause animal suffering, we shouldn't.

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Finally, it is important for Christians to include God in their moral circle. This is part of loving God with all our being. God has well-being. The Scriptures say that he has emotions, which have been negative in response to events on earth, and our time is no exception. So we have a reason to care about him, in himself. But we tend to forget this.

One possible reason for this is that among Christians there are two opposing ideas (or ideas like one or the other of them): one, that we should adjust ourselves to fit God because he is perfect (and he is perfect according to a human idea of what perfection is -- he is all-great and thus can't have any kind of need by which we could benefit him); and the other, that God exists primarily to serve human well-being, or that human well-being was always truly what God wanted (and well-being is to be understood according to a human understanding of well-being), therefore we have no need to inquire into God's well-being, since God's well-being, if it exists, is identical with ours as we understand it (and perhaps we would also want to include the rest of creation to be considered with us -- plants, and animals, and so on). We can see the influence of these two ideas, or

ideas like them, in various parts of Christianity, and perhaps there are not so many who are free from both of them.

If God is part of our moral circle, we might have to change to adjust to that fact, just as how the inclusion of distant people into our moral circle can change our lives.

Labels: #altruism, #empathy, #God, #holiness, #Jesus, #longer, #love, #morality, #suffering God

Contributions to Hardening

%contributions-to-hardening

Tuesday, January 5, 2021

If MSLN is true, then there is some risk that people will become hardened to the voice of God, and fail to complete coming into tune with him. This could happen, I would think, if a person became an enemy of God consciously, became self-satisfied, became insensitive enough to morality (in that that just is what God wants), became unreceptive to beliefs about God, and perhaps in other cases.

If hardening occurs, it is necessary for people to be destroyed by God, because he can't bear our disharmony forever. Those who are destroyed do not experience eternal life. This is the only source of permanent loss in MSLN, and creates the most pressing moral necessity in it.

There are two possibilities: people are 100% responsible for whether they are hardened ("personal hardening"), or less than 100% responsible (others are also somewhat responsible -- "environmental hardening"). In the latter case, we can be responsible, sometimes, for establishing environments in which other people do not become hardened.

Is it likely enough that MSLN is true, and hardening is possible, and there can be "environmental hardening"? If there is a non-Pascalian nonzero chance of those three things obtaining, then we should employ all sufficiently costless measures to create environments favorable to escaping hardening. If that chance is high enough, we should employ more costly measures, in keeping with its probability.

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How can hardening happen? I'm not sure and can't verify this (I don't know if anyone could), so we're left with common sense to forecast.

The theory that I will propose is that we are both tempted and anti-tempted. Our environments offer us the occasion to choose temptation. We either take it, or we don't. If we have fewer occasions, we may be less likely to freely act on them. Each temptation has the chance to move us away from God. There is memory in the process -- previous choices by us create our starting place in a new moment. We might give in, or leap, to temptation. But anti-temptation can work the same way, bringing us back toward God.

If we give in or leap to temptation enough, we can make ourselves enemies of God. Not all temptation is equally dangerous to cause this. But

sometimes, in effect, we are tempted to become enemies of God, and if we give in or leap to this, then we are enemies of God, and if this is established enough, we are hardened.

The emphasis on temptation may make it seem like it would be good to cause everyone to have an obviously or outwardly moral life, but hardening is more about no longer having the inner movement toward God. So giving in to anti-temptation may be a better goal or benchmark than not giving in to temptation.

Some temptations are quiet and come with ease. Ease is dangerous. Some temptations are good, at least on some level. (Otherwise God wouldn't allow them in his world.) Getting rid of all temptations is a mixed strategy -- maybe counterproductive. If you got rid of the obvious temptations, you might be left with the temptations of ease. Creating anti-temptations seems like a safe strategy. Anti-temptations help with both a tempting and an easy environment.

A note from a previous draft of this post:

> If we do target temptations, it may be best to target those which are most closely connected to hardening: temptations to self-satisfaction, to selling yourself out to an unworthy belief system, to wanting the world to be a certain way in conflict with God, moral desensitization, or a direct enmity with God -- and anything else which we can tell is closely linked with hardening. Another, overlapping, approach would be to say that the most dangerous temptations are those that impede anti-temptation.
>
> If we want to be utilitarians, we might tend to prefer fiducial utilitarianism over hedonic or preferential utilitarianism, because fiducialism is inherently about opening people up and connecting them personally to reality outside themselves, hopefully something that if applied generally opens a door to God among the other doors it opens.

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This all makes sense to me rationally, and I think that as far as I can tell right now (January 2021), I see a significant risk of "environmental hardening" being the case, and so it's an area I should do something to help with. But it doesn't make as much sense emotionally or intuitively. It could be that I haven't been raised to have those emotions or intuitions. I was raised in a church where hell was "on the books" but seldom mentioned. People around me rarely if ever seem concerned with the possibility of lostness.

I had a similar emotional / intuitive difficulty believing in a suffering God who negotiates with his spiritual enemies, as you may see here, written in 2017. Now, in 2021, I don't have much trouble "feeling" the truth of it. So I wonder if the same effect may hold here. I haven't thought about this issue much before.

Labels: #culture, #God, #love, #math, #morality, #note, #seriousness, #what is a person?

Rest vs. Stagnation

%rest-vs-stagnation

Wednesday, January 6, 2021

As I write this, I am at home during the coronavirus pandemic. Over this same pandemic, I have also been recovering from some mental health problems. I feel like this extended time spent mostly in the same place has been good. I probably would have chosen this if there hadn't been a pandemic. At the same time, though my situation is not really the most confined, I sometimes feel some kind of cabin fever. If I sit still, I rest. But I can also feel like I need to move, if I sit still long enough. And sometimes I am a slave to my sitting still, and find I can hardly will to move, though it occurs to me to try to will it.

If civilization lasts long enough, it will become sustainable. There are two endpoints: sustainability, or death. I think it is likely that a sustainable civilization will have to be mostly static. If things change too much, our ability to be physically sustainable to a sufficient degree could be threatened. And as time goes on, the possibilities of discovering new ideas for what a culture can be will be exhausted. I wonder if we have exhausted many or even most of them already, most rapidly in the last 200 or 300 years. So we may find ourselves settling on one final culture, having seen what there is to see, and there may not be much change or novelty left.

"Static" can imply both "restful" and "stagnant". So if this final culture is a restful one, that's one thing, and if it's stagnant, that's another. Ordinarily, rest is a positive thing. And stagnation is a negative thing. So we would want to seek rest, rather than stagnation.

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There are only two endpoints, when we're talking about position, but when we're talking about rate of change, there is a third. In other words, there are three stable ways of life which can in principle be extended nearly to infinity: death, sustainability, and endless growth. Endless growth is one way to flee stagnation. It requires an endless supply of space to grow into. We could colonize an infinite universe, and never learn to rest.

Could there somehow be endless cultural growth? Perhaps if we're talking about cultural artifacts, such as movies or books, we could be engineered to have new senses and new emotions, so that we could still have new things. If people can be modified without boundary, we may be able to have all kinds of new experiences. (Modifying people without boundary is dangerous, as well.) But would society be different? Or would we all have

settled into a pattern where everything was arranged optimally and we lived in experience machines, or their equivalents? A planet could spread its "optimal plus experience machine" culture to some other planet -- maybe they have to adjust to the atmosphere on the new planet, which is different than the ones they've had to deal with before. But most people on the home world will just be keeping things going. Will there be faster than light travel or communication? If not, then each planet will be isolated from the others. There will be a pull toward stasis on each planet, even if space colonization gives some reason for a minority to do something somewhat novel.

But as we get better at colonizing planets, the risk and therefore the novelty will be sanded away. We may get into patterns of "Yet another planet. Might as well stay home and plug into the experience machine instead." And much of the process could be automated, once we get good at it. So society and its people could be faced with the question: stagnation, or rest? A sure and steady and effective program of endless growth is its own kind of stasis. It's a formula. Some people will realize this, if enough of us aren't completely immersed in the experience machine.

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Can we find rest in an experience machine? Perhaps. A crude kind of experience machine (watching YouTube or Netflix, reading novel after novel) tends to produce stagnation. But we can imagine that a really good experience machine wouldn't. At least, we could provide the experience of rest in an experience machine. But perhaps rest vs. stagnation is not just about experience, but also about objective reality. So if I am lying on the couch all the time, it doesn't matter what my virtual reality headset has going, I'm not moving. If I am not risking something or trusting something as a person, then every action or romance "holodeck program" I experience adds up to zero -- it doesn't cost me anything, doesn't make me confront anything. Everything it accomplishes it erases with the resolution of the plot; or the return to the experience machine to choose another experience is its own final plot point -- "it was all a dream".

Isn't rest vulnerable to the same criticism as stagnation? When you rest, don't you lie down on the couch just as much? What are the dangers of stagnation? One is that you don't grow enough. Another is that you are not open enough. You can never be receptive to the best if you aren't open to it. So you will be unable to experience the best if you are stagnant. If you are stagnant and satisfied with stagnation, that is the worst. "The best" could be some kind of superlative. "Greater bliss, that no man has ever known" is the goal of some. But "the best" could be "getting to live, at all". Depth and reality sand away the fakeness in all who will consent to be sanded, and thus it is possible for them to be really real, and thus continue to exist forever. So we could say that stagnation leads to death, but rest is

eternal life. So, many of us have not experienced true rest, and are either satisfied with stagnation or are attempting to run away from it.

Stagnation is when something that needs to move isn't moving, and it becomes (or remains) fake, sick, or even deadly. Rest is when something doesn't need to move.

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It looks like we're headed to some kind of stasis -- on our current trajectory, maybe toward total immersion in the experience machine, and if feasible, space colonization. Will that stasis be rest, or stagnation? Or perhaps a deletion of what it means to be human, a destruction of personhood through the end of meaningful choices, risks, and trustings? That's yet another possibility -- maybe conscious stagnation, for all its downside, has the upside of being a choice, which we could reject. But we could become apersonal, atrophying whatever it is that makes us who we are, so that we are experiencing machines, in symbiosis with the experience machine.

In order to really rest as a civilization and as individuals, we have to take care of all the outstanding issues. We need to have achieved perfection -- in other words, become actually good. What are the actual issues remaining?

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Yet, you can feel rest as rest, when you're resting. It's like how you can see the meaning and validity in the objects you directly perceive. Rest really is restful. But if we stay in repose long enough, we find ourselves in a new moment, where if we are sensitive, we will realize that we are beginning to stagnate. Stagnation is really stagnant -- we experience that directly, and find ourselves either enslaved to it, or running away from it, working away from it.

A stagnant pond is not flowing. So if we are really restful, there will be some kind of motion within us, or flowing into us from an outside source, and flowing out of us, away from us. A pond can sit perfectly still, and yet not be stagnant, because the water moves. A pond is not at rest when the flow within it is turbulent, but when the flow is laminar, it can be.

Labels: #civilization, #culture, #death, #evolution, #formulas, #futurism, #psychology, #simplicity, #sustainability

Mixed Stagnation

%mixed-stagnation

Wednesday, January 6, 2021

Gangrene is caused by poor circulation. If there is enough sugar in the blood, bacteria can reproduce, producing an infection that can cause death.

A society with too much wealth can also have stagnation, where some people have nothing to do, and people who do have work do meaningless things.

It's possible to have blood that circulates just fine in a body that still has some serious circulation problems. It's possible to be a very busy person and have parts of your life that are stagnant.

A person can lack money, friends, or the ability to be content with the wealth that they do have -- poverty -- and yet can still have wealth in them. They can be sure that they are right -- believing that things can't be better. And they can feel like on some level, they are done, have figured things out, and can be rich enough to not turn to God -- despite the poverties they do feel.

Labels: #death, #economics, #God, #mental health, #note, #seeking

MSLN Infinite and Population Ethics

%msln-infinite-and-population-ethics

Saturday, January 9, 2021

15 April 2022: See also Size of God, Part 2.

Notes on the "rest view" of population ethics (MSLN population ethics).

To understand this, first read population axiology by Hilary Greaves. (That was my source.) Or search for such terms as:

> population ethics
>
> total view
>
> average view
>
> critical level view
>
> Repugnant Conclusion
>
> Sadistic Conclusion

Additionally, Greaves (p. 5) defines the Mere Addition Principle as:

> The Mere Addition Principle: Let A be any state of affairs. Let B be a state of affairs that is just like A except that, in addition, some extra people with lives worth living exist in B who do not exist in A. Then B is not worse than A.

(These are notes, rather than a normal post. Fewer words, but you may have to think more. Let me know if this format works.)

The rest view (compare with total view, average view, etc.): God wants to rest. He can't bear what is unbearable forever -- that's what unbearability is all about. New people start out of tune with him and have to come into tune with him. They suffer, and God suffers with them. They also violate legitimacy, which is God. This also causes God to suffer. (These things are unbearable to him.) God can suffer for a finite time, but not infinitely. So there must come a time when no new people are created. There must be a

finite number of people who can be with God in the end. It probably has to be an arbitrary number, and it has been chosen or will be chosen by God.

(What if God creates an infinite number of people at once? See the end of this post.)

Ultimately, what threatens entering God's rest is hardening. So well-being can be defined as "likelihood to not be hardened". Society tries to reduce hardening. Hardened people must be destroyed -- God feels the pain of loss.

How does rest view stand up against problems that affect other views?

Repugnant Conclusion: We don't have to create people if we can't take care of them, because God can always create more. He can prolong the duration of the world, to give more time to create people.

Mere Addition Principle: adding a person who won't be hardened is always good. It's not necessarily our responsibility to add that person.

Sadistic Conclusion: Say you have one person with low (less than 50%) likelihood of not being hardened. And you have four people with high (more than 50%) likelihood of not being hardened. If you compare creating the one with creating the four, which is more likely to cause one or more people to be hardened? Whichever one is less likely to produce the hardened outcome is better. I don't think there's anything counter-intuitive here.

What would a society do if it were following the rest view? It may take a certain amount of civilization to be effective at managing temptation and anti-temptation. It takes a certain amount of people to have civilization. And also to make civilization robust, likely to survive. God doesn't or can't intervene in civilizational development beyond a certain point, so a civilization may be a valuable thing to him that we should protect and improve. So there would be a reason to increase population up to a point. (No obligation to engage in space colonization.) Other than the above considerations, try to have a smaller, better-cared-for population.

Strategies for raising likelihood of making it into God's rest, listed in increasing degree of acceptability to secular government: increasing MSLN theism, managing temptation / increasing anti-temptation, fiducial utilitarianism (treats hardening in general, without recommending loyalty to a specific God).

Infinite population (see also "infinite ethics" -- I read Bostrom's "Infinite Ethics"): I'm not sure that infinity can be real (haven't figured out a position on it but intuitively would lean toward "no"). But assuming that it can be, and that we have a population that is infinite in quantity, what then? The number of saved and the number of lost would both be infinite,

but the size of the two infinities could vary, and that's an angle of attack for policymakers. Another way to look at it would be: suppose the rate of hardening is 1 per 5. If you have a stream of people, it would look like (where 1 is unhardened and 0 is hardened) 1 1 1 0 1. Or, if you sample ten people, you could get 1 1 1 0 1 0 1 1 1 1. For whatever finite sampling of the infinite number of people, you will get 1 hardened per 5 unhardened. It's as though there's a density of hardening of 0.2 (20%). 0.2 is a finite number, which (ideally) can be reduced. It requires an infinite number of people to reduce it (but in this scenario, there are an infinite number of people). Would the people actually know to try to reduce the density? God is present in all of reality (even if reality is infinite), so he works to reduce that density in all regions, through the people that exist in them.

If, say, I decide to disobey God and thereby not help my neighbor who is heading toward hardening, then does that matter? It might appear that it does not, if it's assumed that I'm the only one who disobeys. The infinity of other people, lost or saved, would dominate that one loss. The total number of people saved, and lost, would both be infinite, regardless of what I do. But the loss of my neighbor matters to God, who knows everyone, even if there are an infinite number of people. Does God care that the math says that the loss of the person doesn't matter? God's opinions are the foundation of reality, so if he cares, people matter, despite what the math may say.

Labels: #God, #math, #metaethics

Reading List Review and Postview: Population Ethics

%reading-list-review-and-postview

Monday, January 11, 2021

This is the review and post-view for the population ethics reading list.

I found the articles to be of varying relevance to my project. Some of them were long, and I didn't finish them. The two most useful were "Infinite Ethics" by Nick Bostrom and "Population Axiology" by Hilary Greaves.

I thought of reading through the articles twice. But I decided against it due to my declining interest in the subject. Picking low-hanging fruit (/ giving an idea of how I think MSLN applies to infinite and population ethics) seems like a reasonable thing for me to do, but anything that slows me down is probably a bad use of my time, because I'm not really an expert in ethics anyway, and think it unlikely that I ever will be. So I can sketch out relatively obvious things, and see if someone more qualified finds problems with them.

I think from now on, unless I feel particularly moved, I won't re-read reading list papers. Although I did refer to Greaves' paper in writing my response.

Besides this post and the preview post, I derived two posts from reading this list: God is a Good Utility Monster and MSLN Infinite and Population Ethics.

Looking back at the preview, I see that one of my starting intuitions was that population could be any size, as long as people live lives of true well-being. This is fulfilled (unless there are problems I don't currently see with it) by the "rest view" of "MSLN Infinite and Population Ethics". The other was something like the Mere Addition Principle: if one new baby is born and their life goes well, that's good, right? The rest view isn't as favorable to this intuition, but I'm basically satisfied with the compromise in it (a large but finite population, necessarily limited by God's need for rest).

I see that I left some questions for my future self to see:

"1. Is there a rational way to decide how large a population should be? If not, then we are in a situation where we have to decide without a right answer."

> The rest view recommends that we have whatever size

population is most effective at reducing hardening. Answering this question is not trivial, but in principle there is an answer. We can't have a firm, verified measure of hardening, but we can make common sense guesses as to how hardening works and what kinds of environments are better or worse for it, and then measure our progress using those. With that in place, if we have enough resources to think this question through, we should be able to come up with a best guess.

"2. Questions of moral philosophies affecting population-ethical views:"

The basic idea with these was to see if there were any ideas that could help choose between expansionary and contented growth strategies. We could find ourselves unsure whether to choose between, say, total and average utilitarianism, and "break the tie" by considering one of the following.

"a. Hedonism lends itself to having more and more. Preferentialism can lend itself to that but also can lend itself to saying 'everybody got what they wanted, so we don't need any more.' With preferentialism, there's a question of 'what should people prefer?' The answer to that might answer the question 'should we want more and more, or should we be content?' Or we could say that there's no good or bad preferences. Then we wonder what random preferences humans might have, and how they might tilt toward more or fewer people."

I don't have much more of an answer as of this writing.

"b. What about fiducialism? Is fiducialism a "more and more" thing ('adventure', as in the *Fiducialism* booklet), or inherently about connecting with what is ('mission', or "receptivity to reality")? 'Mission' is itself about the reality of people. This lends itself to saying 'connect with the reality of existing people'. But then, couldn't it lend itself to saying 'there ought to be more people', to whose reality one could connect? So that's a hole in fiducialism to try to fill."

As of the date of posting this, my general sense is that there's nothing greedy or compelled about fiducialism, but there's also something open to expansion in it. So, too hard to tell whether it's more in favor of growth or contentment? Effectively neutral? There are different flavors of "neutral". For instance, a high variance and low variance life can be very different, even if on average they might be the same. So a neutral of "I don't care" is different than a fiducialist neutral.

"c. What do people mean to us? Are they to be seen economically, or in some other way? And given the answers to those questions, how strict should we be in making ourselves live according to economic thinking?"

> I guess MSLN suggests that God sees nobody solely economically, even if we have to. (Even if there were an infinite number of us, God would directly and personally relate to each of us). But I suppose even God might have to think about quantities of people, in order to make things go best for the most number. This would be in addition to his direct relationship. This relationship with all individuals is something human utilitarians are unable to have. But maybe there are cases where we can think of people less economically.

"3. What might population ethics look like given the God of MSLN?"

> Answered in "MSLN Infinite and Population Ethics".

"a. God had some reason for creating people in the first place (unless there is no reason). Does this mean that in absence of a defeater, he will never stop creating people?"

> According to the rest view, no.

"b. Would God value having more and more for its own sake? Is God a slave to maximization?"

> The rest view avoids having to answer this question by saying God can't keep having more and more people. Plausibly, God lives according to fiducialism, and feels both the adventure and mission side of it, but maybe mission is the stronger impulse in God. So maybe he would favor rest and contentment, and thus be immune to the compulsion to maximize.

"c. Are people created new, or is there a fixed supply of people created once and for all at the beginning of time, which God then brings into consciousness during their time in history?"

> I wouldn't assume that there is a hard limit from a kind of "pre-existence", and I don't think there is a reason why there would be one (at least, not that I can think of).

"Possible answer: We are called to enter God's rest, and presumably God seeks rest, too. New people have to work out their salvation, which is not

restful for God. So it seems like there is some finite limit to population, so that there can be a time of permanent rest afterward.

"If so, maybe if we increase population above baseline, what we're doing is accelerating the end of the world.

"Or, if God can handle our turmoil forever, he can create people forever. If he thinks there aren't enough people, he can always create more. Ultimately, it's his decision how many people there are, because he pays the biggest price for human experience and ultimately has power over the way things are. So if we create more people, he may cause fewer to be created elsewhere."

> How could God handle our turmoil forever? Maybe by taking periods of rest in between batches of new people. I tend to think that wouldn't work, because God can anticipate the pain of what is to come, and that anticipation would be at least a little bit unbearable. Or very unbearable, depending on the interplay between God's sensitivity and his patience. Jesus had a moment where he was in anguish over having to go the cross, and the Father might have a similar moment in anticipation of creating a new world.

Labels: #book review, #economics, #God, #Jesus, #metaethics, #rest, #suffering God

News: 11 January 2021

%news-11-january-2021

Monday, January 11, 2021

I finished the population ethics reading list. I'm thinking of reading a moral realism vs. anti-realism reading list that is on my list from the EA Forum already. It could help me with the *The Feeling of Value* review. I'm getting closer to finishing that one.

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I made a card game (a set of rules) which is a fun way to get acquainted with texts from the Desert Fathers, Simone Weil, and Ramon Llull (and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, the Sufis, Zen masters, and so on...).

Labels: #news and meta

Reading List Preview: Moral Realism and Anti-Realism

%reading-list-preview-moral-realism-and

Thursday, January 14, 2021

I want to learn more about moral realism and moral anti-realism. So I'll be reading this "sequence" of posts on the subject, as a reading list. [Update: this link is more user-friendly.]

Here is a list of my questions on the topic, some of which I hope the reading list will answer, and some which I do not think it will, but which I may answer myself as I read:

> Why are moral anti-realists moral in practice?
>
> Does moral anti-realism come as a pragmatic choice? (We might choose it so that everything moral depends on human consensus, rather than all humans having to agree on the same external moral standard. Also moral anti-realists would perhaps not feel as often that their way was right, and thus they would find it easier to get along with other people.)
>
> Or is moral anti-realism something which comes from a full pursuit of what is true? (Trying as hard as you can to be epistemically rational, you will find yourself not believing in moral realism).
>
> Do people believe things because they are true, or for pragmatic reasons?
>
> If our pragmatism is ill-founded, what can cause us to change? (A moral realism? Can we approach morality with enough of a sense of responsibility to the truth to even believe in moral realism, though it confronts our current sense of practical well-being?)
>
> Can moral anti-realism prevent extinction risk from voluntary anti-natalism? Or from AI manipulating human biology so that we no longer have the drive to survive and resist AI? (Or, perhaps more realistically, from the drift of cultures of AI or

AI plus the humans who have some influence on them, causing us to lose interest in survival?) Future people coming to positions, that they hold ostensibly voluntarily, that undo everything we find meaningful morally. (*X-Risk* makes a case for dealing with X-risk, like it's our mature responsibility to do so. But why should we be obliged to care about it any more than we already do? It's entirely possible that people in the future won't. So are we *morally* obliged to care? If so, then why can't that moral obligation apply to our descendants? But then we would want some kind of time-invariant morality, probably a moral realism.)

Do we "want" realism for our own purposes (moral realism a construct for our own pragmatic ends) or is realism something forced on us that we have to adapt to? We take physical reality as a hard given and don't complain too much, so presumably we could adapt to a morality that was as "rude" as it is. But perhaps we fear a real morality because it threatens our well-being as we currently understand it. It's as though humanity forms a consensus of what we like, and that's our reality, the one we construct. And moral realism is either part of that human-constructed reality (and thus is safe, but not fully independent of us after all) or it's outside that consensus and is independent, as real as physics, and it might go against our consensus. I think, as a matter of fact, the fact that there even is a debate over moral realism vs. anti-realism may indicate that we have some kind of choice, that we are not forced.

If we aren't forced to believe in moral realism, is there some other way to relate to reality which does cause us to adhere to it? Strictly speaking, none of us are forced to believe in external reality or other minds. But we investigate what is there before us, and we want to know what there is to know about what we see, in case it is real. This exploratory, perhaps "amatory" or "altruistic", approach to knowledge could apply with moral realism. From a theistic analogy, we can do what's right because it is right because of God, and God forces us to do it; or we can do right because it is right because of God, and that's enough for us, since we love God. We can believe a truth because it is true and we are forced to acknowledge it for reasons of survival or expedience (pragmatism), or we can believe it because it is true, because we love truth. I can think of a theistic moral realism and know of at least one atheistic

> moral realism (Rawlette's). Do we 1) "love moral realisms to be true" (even atheistic ones), or do we 2) construct them to be true, or are we 3) forced to find them true? Another analogy for "love something to be true" is to go out to meet that truth, put yourself out there, explore to find it, work to believe it once you see that it's there. Can truths believed this way still be epistemically rational? They aren't identical to constructed truths, but are they still too similar to them, if constructed truths fall short of those needed for realism?
>
> Might we be psychological anti-realists despite our belief in moral realism? Might we be rational anti-realists because we are psychological anti-realists? For any number of reasons, a person's brain can become disposed to not believe in things, or to not even trust the category of belief in certain things (find things to "not even be true").

This list should be enough to start with.

I somewhat wonder if I should look for more readings on this important topic, besides the sequence mentioned above. Maybe I'll feel up to it when I am done with that.

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Update: having begun to read the sequence, I find some links to add to the reading list:

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) on John Mackie's Argument from Queerness

Wikipedia on G. E. Moore's Open Question Argument

Peter Singer The Triviality of the Debate Over 'Is-Ought' and the Definition of 'Moral'

Alonzo Fyfe and Luke Muehlhauser Morality in the Real World podcast (transcripts here). (Not sure what's in this but it might have something to do with realism vs. anti-realism -- at worst be an example of a moral realism). Episodes I listened to:

> "01 Introduction"
>
> "02 God is Not the Ground for Morality"

Labels: #book review, #civilization, #epistemology, #exploration, #futurism, #love, #metaethics, #pragmatism

Loving God More

%loving-god-more

Sunday, January 17, 2021

From Matthew 22 (also referred to in this post):

> 34 But the Pharisees, when they heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, gathered themselves together. 35 One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, testing him. 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?"
>
> 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

As a result of life experience, I have come to the view, for myself, of wanting to love God more than I love myself, or other people.

But other people might not want there to be any setting of one over the other. Love is all just one thing. If you love God with all your being, you can do that by loving yourself and other people with all your being, too.

There may well be no conflict between loving yourself and other people on the one hand, and loving God on the other, in an ideal case. But I think that it's important to realize that loving God and loving people are not always identically the same, because God is a separate person than us. Further, he is capable of having desires and intuitions other than our own about how things should be. God is an underrepresented voice in our lives, despite his omnipresence. If our opinions, desires, points of view, etc. are in conflict with God's, then there is a problem, and we should definitely love God more than we do anyone else in that case.

(One reason why is that God is legitimacy.)

In order to love God, you have to love other people. So that might be the right way to approach things: love God by loving people. Loving people as an expression of your love for God.

Labels: #God, #humanism, #love, #note

Parables of the Talents and Minas

%parables-of-talents-and-minas

Sunday, January 17, 2021

This post is about two parables, and a vision of the future that goes with one of them.

In the parable of the talents, and the parable of the minas, someone in charge goes on a journey, entrusting his concerns to servants. They are given amounts of money to take care of. Two people in each parable make more money with the money they have been given. One person in each parable is afraid of the person in charge, and doesn't use the money to make more money. The person in charge, in the end, is happy with the two who work, and unhappy with the one who is afraid.

Is the one who is afraid of the master humble? Are the other servants humble for working diligently? Maybe there are good humilities, and bad humilities.

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Parable of the Minas:

Luke 19:

> 11 As they heard these things, he went on and told a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that God's Kingdom would be revealed immediately. 12 He said therefore, "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. 13 He called ten servants of his and gave them ten mina coins, and told them, 'Conduct business until I come.' 14 But his citizens hated him, and sent an envoy after him, saying, 'We don't want this man to reign over us.'
>
> 15 "When he had come back again, having received the kingdom, he commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by conducting business. 16 The first came before him, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made ten more minas.'

17 "He said to him, 'Well done, you good servant! Because you were found faithful with very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.'

18 "The second came, saying, 'Your mina, Lord, has made five minas.'

19 "So he said to him, 'And you are to be over five cities.'

20 Another came, saying, 'Lord, behold, your mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief, 21 for I feared you, because you are an exacting man. You take up that which you didn't lay down, and reap that which you didn't sow.'

22 "He said to him, 'Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant! You knew that I am an exacting man, taking up that which I didn't lay down and reaping that which I didn't sow. 23 Then why didn't you deposit my money in the bank, and at my coming, I might have earned interest on it?' 24 He said to those who stood by, 'Take the mina away from him and give it to him who has the ten minas.'

25 "They said to him, 'Lord, he has ten minas!' 26 'For I tell you that to everyone who has, will more be given; but from him who doesn't have, even that which he has will be taken away from him. 27 But bring those enemies of mine who didn't want me to reign over them here, and kill them before me.'" 28 Having said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

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Parable of the Talents:

(To understand the following best, think of "talent" as "a large quantity of money", its original meaning.)

Matthew 25:

14 "For it is like a man going into another country, who called his own servants and entrusted his goods to them. 15 To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his own ability. Then he went on his journey. 16 Immediately he who received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. 17 In the same

way, he also who got the two gained another two. 18 But he who received the one talent went away and dug in the earth and hid his lord's money.

19 "Now after a long time the lord of those servants came, and settled accounts with them. 20 He who received the five talents came and brought another five talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents. Behold, I have gained another five talents in addition to them.'

21 "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things, I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

22 "He also who got the two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents. Behold, I have gained another two talents in addition to them.'

23 "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things. I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

24 “He also who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you that you are a hard man, reaping where you didn't sow, and gathering where you didn't scatter. 25 I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the earth. Behold, you have what is yours.'

26 "But his lord answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant. You knew that I reap where I didn't sow, and gather where I didn't scatter. 27 You ought therefore to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received back my own with interest. 28 Take away therefore the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. 29 For to everyone who has will be given, and he will have abundance, but from him who doesn't have, even that which he has will be taken away. 30 Throw out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Immediately after, in Matthew 25:

31 But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the

holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will tell those on his right hand, 'Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. 36 I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? 38 When did we see you as a stranger and take you in, or naked and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and come to you?'

40 "The King will answer them, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' 41 Then he will say also to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you didn't give me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you didn't take me in; naked, and you didn't clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

44 "Then they will also answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and didn't help you?'

45 "Then he will answer them, saying, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you didn't do it to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me.' 46 These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

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These might sound like fanciful stories meant to get us to say "Helping people is good. Not helping people is bad." We have a hard time bearing to think that some people will be sent to a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" for not working when they could have. Perhaps we think that that place of weeping is hell. In the above, it may be that the "outer darkness"

where the unprofitable servant goes is not hell, but that the "goats" found in the vision of the future, and the enemies of the nobleman found at the end of the parable of the minas, do go to hell, and ultimately it is their enmity with Jesus which makes them destined for that fate.

Among the "sheep" in the vision of the future are people who didn't take every opportunity to help Jesus whenever he was really present in a needy person's suffering. Yet they are righteous -- they are no longer the people who ignored the suffering of others. But those who are enemies of Jesus do not have his help in really getting past that, because enmity with Jesus involves rejecting his help -- perhaps in most or all cases, enmity with Jesus and rejecting his help are identical -- and they must face punishment without his help. Jesus can be angry at people who are ultimately going to be saved, requiring them to mature in the environment that they need to be in for a time: outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. (We may be familiar with an experience of darkness like this from our own lives.)

With that in mind, maybe then we can bear to take the parables or visions of the future literally. We can take Jesus' anger seriously, the anger of someone who has the right to be angry, angry at us for not seeing a world of suffering as a field of ample opportunity.

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Now, is it really the case that anybody thinks "God is a hard master, so I will do nothing for him, and only return my talent to him unused"? I don't hear people saying that.

But maybe it's still applicable. There is such a thing as "hard, exacting master" mentality. Because God is thought to be a "hard, exacting master", we think in terms of "Am I saved? Or am I lost?" rather than "How is God doing? How are people doing?" If we ask the latter set of questions, then we tend to work. But if we ask the former set of questions, then in order to see ourselves as saved, we stop paying attention to how God wants us to work. Out of our image of God as hard and exacting, we create a defense mechanism ("salvation") which prevents us from working.

Unfortunately, asking and therefore promoting the question "are you saved?" is meant to be the way in which people perform the ultimate good deed, to save someone from hell. We raise that question to get people to see the value of following Jesus, following in some minimal way. So the person hearing "are you saved?" is taught from the beginning of their religious walk to think that salvation is the point. They may or may not ever figure out on their own that they're supposed to love God, and that that love ought to involve their whole being. And that in order to love God, part of that involves serving him and other people -- work.

In reality, if we do not love God, we are not ready for eternal life. At best,

we may be on the right track. So evangelists might ask "Do you love God? Are you sure?"

The language of "are you saved?" makes a lot of sense if it is assumed that time is precious, and the mouth of hell waits for far too many people. This is one evangelical view. So we have to strip down the Christian religion to "a faith that is barely capable of saving", but therefore quick and easy to transmit. Churches are incentivized to come up with gospels that work, ones which are popular. But now churches lament the lack of spiritual maturity in their midst. In some churches, the leaders get burned out, while many followers seemingly do nothing. Maybe the leaders are "shepherds" and the followers are "sheep" -- implying, perhaps, that like literal shepherds and sheep, the latter never become the former. But then, we are all just human beings, so one might think that at least some sheep can become shepherds. But why would they? They're saved, right?

In some cases, perhaps people are immature and value their own salvation more than they value anything else. So God is a giant salvation machine, to them. But in other cases, people are busy and demotivated. What kind of incentive do they have for fighting against inertia and fatigue, to go do some laudable but supererogatory thing? We can love our friends and family quite naturally -- this is a "gravity" thing. But anybody else, we have to go out of our way to help. And we're saved, so we don't have to do anything. Salvation gives us the assurance that we can live our everyday lives.

The MSLN view is that we are not fully saved until we are fully in tune with God. To be in tune with God requires that we love him, and if we love him, we will come into tune with him. Does God put his own salvation first? We wouldn't be here if he did. So we must become like him, and come to not put our own salvation first. And if we are concerned about salvation and want to know what it is, it is identical with loving God. (We love other people and ourselves as part of loving God, and less than we love God.)

Do we really love God? Do we take for granted the people we really love? So we should not be complacent. But as Jesus warns us above, thinking that God is hard and exacting is a way to bring out his hard and exacting side. So we should never despair that God won't offer salvation to us if we seek him.

Labels: #altruism, #bible reading, #God, #Jesus, #love

Don't Worry, Work

%dont-worry-work

Sunday, January 17, 2021

Sometimes I'm disconnected from the world, but other times I engage. I read what's on Twitter, when I can't seem to find anything else to do. There's something about really thinking about the particulars of what is going on in the world that can put anxiety into a person's body.

I feel like I'm learning something, by reading the feed, and that means I'm accomplishing something. But in reality, the amount of work getting done is small compared to the sense of work getting done.

What can we do to solve the world's problems? We are so helpless. All we can do is read the news and feel the appropriate human feelings. It's the best we can do -- or is it?

It's entirely possible that the world can't be fixed. It will fall apart. It's possible that it can be and it won't. Nobody really knows.

It may be somewhat helpful for us to talk about how we do things. I don't know if the following is something that would help anyone else, but this is how I try to handle these situations of news anxiety. It's a little like Stoicism or the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It combines two of Jesus' teachings: 1) Don't worry, and 2) work.

Here is my take, which might innovate (for better or worse):

as to 1 -- You have to be willing to die, and to suffer. And to see those you love die, and suffer. And to be willing to assume that civilization will die out -- none of your efforts will come to anything, and everything will be destroyed. It may be difficult and not up to you to feel all that willingness as true, in your body, but *you* can defy that, you can be yourself and as yourself accept total loss, and it's possible your body will follow. It is easier to bear this if you believe in God -- even the thought that everything will perish is easier to bear if God is real;

-- and as to 2: dispose of your resources as diligently and effectively as you know how (start by disposing of them a little more diligently and effectively). If you can't figure out something to do to deal with "the situation RIGHT NOW", then try to work on solving similar situations 5 years from now, or 10. You can always learn something now that might help you later. Try to think deeply and invent plausible dreams. Work on solving a small problem, even if you can't solve a big one.

How would God judge you? Does God say "They didn't save the world...

I'm angry"? Why would we be able to save the world? Maybe we can. But is there a good reason why humans necessarily ought to be able to? However, if the Bible is any indication, God gets angry at us if we don't use our ability to work.

The malaise we feel from the news is fear. Fear is somehow a virtuous thing. But the Bible says, in Proverbs 26:13:

> The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! A fierce lion roams the streets!"

If responsibility turns into fear ("I need to save the world; I need to know the news") and fear turns into inaction, then responsibility is doing the same job as laziness in keeping us in bondage: perhaps in Proverbs, to the bed; but in our cases, to our screens. And it may be possible that deep inside us sometimes it is laziness, the laziness of following the string of pearls in the feed, fed to us, which causes us to feel so discouraged, so incapable of motion.

Guilt implies hope -- if you hold yourself accountable, you can discover strength.

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Sometimes it's better to rest than to work. If reading the news is restful, as it can be for some people, then that could be good. Somehow for me, reading the news, or any kind of social media for very long, simultaneously promises me rest and work while giving me neither. A friend of mine says that social media steals your time.

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I'm writing this [16 January 2021], having trouble sleeping -- somewhat from the news, somewhat from life. When I stop typing, the anxiety comes back in my body. So I try to make the best of my time, by writing. This writing may encourage you -- or likely enough, a future version of me.

Labels: #addiction, #civilization, #death, #God, #personal, #psychology, #spiritual bondage, #work

God Breaking Consensus

%god-breaking-consensus

Thursday, January 28, 2021

Genesis 11:

> 1 The whole earth was of one language and of one speech. 2 As they traveled east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they lived there. 3 They said to one another, "Come, let's make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. 4 They said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top reaches to the sky, and let's make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad on the surface of the whole earth."
>
> 5 Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men built. 6 Yahweh said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do. Now nothing will be withheld from them, which they intend to do. 7 Come, let's go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So Yahweh scattered them abroad from there on the surface of all the earth. They stopped building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there Yahweh confused the language of all the earth. From there, Yahweh scattered them abroad on the surface of all the earth.

I'm not sure if human civilization is attempting to do the exact same thing as the people in this story. But I can see us trying to form a unity within ourselves that excludes God. If everybody agreed that there was no God, or that God didn't really matter, then what could get us to change our minds? If the things we make satisfy us more and more, then why would we seek God? Our ability to make a structure (and before that, or at the same time, a consensus) that satisfies us as we are, is perhaps the fastest route to happiness. And why wouldn't we take the fastest route to happiness? Arguably, it's immoral not to.

Anarchy is an obvious problem, when it goes wrong. But order is a subtler and more seductive problem, when it goes wrong. Likewise antisocial behavior is an obvious problem that every society has some compensating response against. But consensus is a danger we don't have much experience with, don't have as many built-in safeguards against.

We can have a consensus someday, but whatever that consensus is, it has to include God as someone with a voice in it.

Labels: #bible reading, #civilization, #God

Ministry of Love

%ministry-of-love

Friday, January 29, 2021

In *1984*, George Orwell depicts a totalitarian society which immiserates and degrades its citizens. And yet many of the people seem to be okay with it. The society keeps itself together, in part, through its "Ministry of Love", which tortures and breaks down people until they come to love the status quo as it is.

The irony is that the narrative many people tell of their lives is of a kind of positive Ministry of Love, which converts them from being bad or unrealistic people through perhaps painful means.

How do you know which it was? A humbling which "you needed"? Or the operation of an evil world order? The status quo keeps itself the status quo somehow. Purely by chance something must tend to come to make it hard for it to be otherwise than it is, if nothing intentional comes.

Maybe you know by comparing your mind, and society, against some kind of reference point which stays the same after your breakdown. In *1984*, it seems that perhaps the depicted society is so far gone that you can't even have that reference point. But our society is not so bad yet. Yet, if we do not choose to look at the reference point, it's functionally the same as if we didn't have one available.

Labels: #George Orwell, #maturity, #note, #psychology

Friends and Enemies

%friends-and-enemies

Sunday, January 31, 2021

There are different meanings to "enemy". Someone can be opposed to your interests or well-being. They can be on the opposite side of the war between human faction and human faction, or between God and his enemies. Certainly that's a form of enmity. A person can be bad for you and partly intend the harm they cause. That's also a form of enmity.

Are *you their* enemy? Not necessarily. But still, are *they your* enemy? They may be an enemy of you, but you don't have to be an enemy of them.

Somehow it's possible to look at someone as not being your enemy, even if they are dangerous, untrustworthy, clearly intending evil for you. They are your enemy, and it is wise to understand that, but at the same time, and in a different sense, you can see them as not being your enemy.

There's a connection between seeing someone as an enemy to you, and you being an enemy to them. Who is a person, essentially? Just a person, no more or less. Accidentally, they may be hellbent on contending for their own side.

(We have to be careful how we see evil.)

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Not everyone who likes you is your friend. But liking helps. Liking draws people closer to each other. Whether they choose to really become friends at that distance, may or may not occur.

A friend is someone who is genuinely on your side. Often, it's better to not be on someone else's side at all than to falsely be on their side.

Perhaps you don't share all of your life with a friend. You put your differences of opinion outside the friendship, because you must each be on a different side of a question, and you wish to remain on the side of your friend in the areas where you do overlap. Do you respect your friend's differing point of view? You might not be able to respect it if you think it's evil.

You don't have to make friends out of everyone. Jesus commands us to love our enemies.

Labels: #note, #relationships, #trust

Seeing Evil

%seeing-evil

Sunday, January 31, 2021

Seeing evil is a dangerous thing. If you see evil in something, a thing or phenomenon, you might transfer that sense to seeing evil in someone, a person. If you do that, and you're wrong, you might beat and break down someone who is innocent. So those who want to manage the world may not want you to see evil.

But evil is real. Most of us have seen it, and if we're honest, we recognize that it's real. The truth is that humans are not our worst enemies, but there is an enemy.

Ephesians 6:

> 12 For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world's rulers of the darkness of this age, and against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Perhaps "the world's rulers of the darkness of this age" could be humans. It could be that some people in power more or less knowingly choose darkness, and are disproportionately able to keep the world in bondage. Generally, evil comes from the spiritual world. The evil that we see on earth from human to human generally descends from supernatural lies and dark spirits. Humans experience generational trauma and are constrained to a large extent by their genes and whatever ideas they have available to them from their culture. Many people who appear evil have less choice in who they are than we may like to think. They may be conduits of evil, but only as those in bondage to it themselves. But like in any scene, everything comes from consciousness. Someone does consciously choose the world to be broken and perverse.

If sometimes humans really are evil, should we use violence against them? We assume that such evil people can't be redeemed by showing them the truth. Seeing evil is dangerous because the evil that appears so clearly before us might turn out to not be the real evil, and in fighting what we think is evil, we end up doing evil ourselves, the work of the spirits who pit humans against each other. Seeing evil does not necessarily require us to act violently against it. And violence itself is evil. Those who are against evil should be against violence, even the violence necessary to fight evil. (The lesser of two evils is always evil, by definition.) Your desire to fight evil might be your love of violence, of evil, mixed with your love of what

is good.

(Similar to violence are coercion and manipulation, which are also evil in themselves.)

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One way that helps to keep from the danger of seeing evil is to see evil, but not fear it.

The chief evil is to fail to fully connect with God. A world with no other evils, but without God, might be the worst evil for being so subtle. Perhaps we are all evil -- we are to whatever extent we choose to be enemies of God.

Whatever you see, whatever you point out or hold your attention on, including danger and evil, you see because God exists. Evil really exists, but it is dangerous to forget the bigger picture, of what is good.

Labels: #God, #note, #politics, #spiritual bondage

Fiducialism

%fiducialism

Tuesday, February 2, 2021

This was meant to replace Fiducial Utilitarianism. I think it improves it in some ways, but I'm okay with the older version, too. This one only focuses on "fiducialism", while the other one talks more about utilitarianism as well. This booklet may also be helpful to read on the subject.

10 December 2021: See also a reason why fiducialism may be necessary.

"Fiducialism" is my term, borrowing from Joseph Godfrey's (or some source of his's) term "fiducial", which means "pertaining to trust". Fiducialism is when we seek to trust. Hedonism is when we seek positive experiences, but fiducialism is when we seek to be receptive to some kind of positivity ("receptivity to enhancement" is Godfrey's definition of trust, in his *Trust of People, Words, and God*). I don't remember Godfrey's take, but I think "enhancement" can be defined as broadly as "well-being". If I am receptive to something as though it it is making me better off in some way, whatever definition of "better off" I trust as true, then I am trusting it.

Trust is personal connection. We trust the chairs we sit in, and the ground we walk on. We trust ideas -- even ones that in a sense we distrust. Just by thinking them enough to disagree with them, we trust them. We connect with their reality. We are receptive to what comes our way through these connections.

Some things inhibit trust. An "insult to the organ of trust" ("insult" in a medical sense) can be called a betrayal. A betrayal can hinder a person's ability to trust, either temporarily or permanently. We avoid betrayals so that we can trust more. Inhibiting trust in a betraying thing (a prudent behavior) helps us to trust more in the long run.

Part of trusting more is to trust more and more things. Or, perhaps more precisely, to be capable of trusting more and more things. What's important is to develop the receptivity. It's important to go out and experience the world so that you open yourself up on the inside. But when you have experienced enough, you don't need to keep experiencing things. Then you can rest.

It's important for a fiducialist to trust the set of all things, to have an overall trust. Godfrey calls something like this "security trusting" (trusting what is, over all, to be good in the end for you) and "openness trusting" (you approach reality as something which can give you opportunities). Security trusting and openness trusting are part of everyone's lives to some

extent, whether or not they officially acknowledge them or know how they might be rationally justified.

I think that altruists are people who trust, who personally connect with reality other than themselves. Trusting brings life to people. Trusting preserves personality, because it is *you*, the person, who trust. A hedonist could cease to be a person in that emphatic sense, as they may be passively fed positive experiences. But fiducialists *themselves* trust whatever experience they have, to the full extent that it is trustworthy.

We need to open up to this or that thing, but one reality we need to open up to is "the best". Strangely, we don't have a taste or a stomach for the best, at least, not always developed to its full extent. So to be a fiducialist, we have to seek what is highest, deepest, and truest. A fiducialist can't avoid what is best, hoping to only trust the easier things. Trusting can be difficult and costly.

The very idea of maximization, at the heart of utilitarianism, can come out of a receptivity to "the best".

Fiducialism could be considered a definition of instrumental rationality, just like hedonism. It inherently disposes us to connect with the truth, which is like "the best", or is part of "the best". So it is a good grounding for epistemic rationality. Hedonism allows us to go into the experience machine, but fiducialism wants to be open to what exists. It does not force us to connect with all facts, but just as many facts as it takes for us to connect with what is deepest, truest, and highest. Fiducialists who do not seek out all facts are still receptive to them.

Fiducialism is disposed to value all things except to the extent that they betray. The process of growing in fiducialism sometimes requires betrayals, breakings-open. We can have a false wholeness that needs to be broken. Fiducialism wants us to be disposed to value all the things that matter, to have a complete picture. To the extent that we have the occasion or opportunity, we will value, connect with, all things.

Labels: #aesthetics, #metaethics, #social connection, #trust

MSLN Reasons to Oppose X-Risks

%msln-reasons-to-oppose-x-risks

Thursday, February 4, 2021

10 December 2021: See also Disestablishedness vs. Anti-temptation.

Existential risks (things that wipe out the human species (extinction risks); make it so that future humans can never regain our level of civilization; or cause a sufficiently large amount of suffering, perhaps "forever") are of obvious concern to humanists. If there is no God, then it would seem that humans are responsible for stopping X-risks. We can't count on anyone else helping. (A view like this can be found in *X-Risk* by Thomas Moynihan.)

Should a theist care about existential risk? I'll consider the MSLN point of view.

One reason existential risks that do not cause extinction are a problem is the suffering they cause. Suffering is bad in itself but a broken-down civilization may also not be optimal for drawing people to God. One existential risk is global totalitarian government, which could cause suffering and put people in bondage, no less spiritual than political.

A "clean" extinction could also be a problem from God's point of view. We tend to think that there has been such a thing as moral progress from the early days of humanity. Christians think this came through Abraham, his descendants, and Jesus and his followers. Secular people think this came through civilizational development (or something like that). Either way, it takes a lot of work to get where we are now. For some reason, God didn't create us all with a nice, morally-progressed culture. Perhaps there were reasons why he couldn't. So then an extinction either causes him to say "that's it, that's the total number of people who will ever exist" or "now I have to create another universe and live through the process of civilizational/kingdom maturing again". Neither option would be optimal for God, in seeking rest, unless the extinction happened exactly when he would have ended the world anyway.

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If MSLN were used as the base for a reason (or reasons) to oppose X-risk, it might look something like this:

We have to pay attention to reason because it enables us to deal with the ultimate risk, punishment from God, if we risk hardening through being

closed to reason. The voice of God changing us to become fit for him can come through inferences, and if we feel like we are sovereigns who can ignore the implications of facts, when we do so we may be shutting out God. Reason gives us the framework to take everything seriously, and the sense of obligation to facts, so we don't just disregard them when we feel like it. Through that, we oppose X-risk, even if X-risk is not an obvious problem, visible right in front of us. Through reason, we care about future people, as much as through it we would care about people living far away.

The preceding paragraph is provisional. I should make a more developed post on the relationship between belief in God and reason.

God wants civilization to be preserved. He suffered a lot to see civilization this far. Civilization is better than non-civilization for preventing hardening. Or if it's not, civilization is more or less inevitable -- humans seek success and success adds up to civilization. But alternative civilizations to our own could actually be worse from God's perspective, so it's worth preserving it ourselves, until he chooses to end it. Preserving (and improving) our own civilization, it seems, is the best way to prevent hardening. So people's lives (eternal lives) are at stake, in us preserving civilization.

God could always intervene in trying to preserve civilization, and he may be quite active, behind the scenes. But he may not protect us from everything. The genocides of the 20th century weren't what he really wanted, but they happened. But humans might have been able to prevent them, even if he wouldn't or couldn't.

We are motivated by fear (the origin of reason) and also by love (concern for those, including ourselves, who might be hardened in an environment with more contributions to hardening than our own civilization).

Labels: #civilization, #death

Cultural Drift as X-Risk

%cultural-drift-as-x-risk

Thursday, February 4, 2021

Cultural drift is the process by which a culture changes in a way that no one person intends. An X-risk (existential risk) is one which threatens the survival of humans or their ability to rebuild to our level of civilization. Or the definition can be broadened (as in this book) to include anything that threatens the long-term potential of the human species. This might include things that cause a great deal of suffering (S-risk).

Is cultural drift (as X-risk) something to be worried about? Would people freely choose a bad outcome for themselves? Of course, it would seem good to them. But we might not agree. Longtermists (future-oriented altruists) want to make the future be a certain way -- contain humans, for instance. They might be willing to make all kinds of plans to make that happen. It would make sense to try to provide for a way to resist cultural drift, if cultural drift could produce the same negative outcome as some other cause of extinction or S-risk that we currently plan to avert. We wouldn't want humanity to die out, voluntarily or through insufficient motivation to save itself, or for there to be a kind of totalitarianism in which the people have been "ministry of love"d to the point of approving of their own subjugation and torture. These are two possible outcomes of cultural drift, two things that could somehow seem good to future people.

How would this be protected against? We have to be willing to say that some human preferences, and some human cultures, are wrong. So we probably want some kind of moral realism that is culture-invariant, which does not progress / drift historically. The realism would imply a worldview which would enable us to build an axiology maintaining the importance of resisting extinction or S-risk. A kind of firm and consistent cultural constitution.

Why might we not want such a thing? One possibility is that we want to respect the ability of every culture, every generation of humans, to make their own choices. If we are moral anti-realists, we may want to extend the logic of that so far that we don't constrain any future people to what are our contingent judgments anyway. If a future generation wants to choose to die or become slaves, so be it. While we can certainly try to force future people to do what we want, regardless of their preferences, for some reason we prefer not to do that, perhaps because it appears wrong to us, and though we are moral anti-realists, we still obey our own consciences as though they matter, aren't just contingent themselves.

Humans may someday become useless, no longer needed to run civilization. We could drift toward being useless, with the decisions we make. We might choose convenience and enjoyment over maintaining an interest in human-AI affairs. Then, human-AI culture may drift to the point that AI no longer value us, and we no longer value ourselves. And then we die out, to save resources for the advancement of civilization.

This might not sound bad, if we assume that AI can carry on being conscious without us. But why should we be so sure that AI can be conscious? A materialist might assume that anything that acts like it's conscious, or maybe better, has sufficiently human-like neural structures (or equivalents to neural structures), is conscious. If structures and behaviors like ours are how we know that our peers have minds, if neural structures just are what make us conscious, then we can be pretty sure that AI can be conscious.

However, assuming materialism seems shaky to me. Immaterialism is at least as good as materialism, (I think better), as an explanation of what we observe. As an immaterialist, I wouldn't risk torturing an AI, because an AI (as it appeared to me) could happen to have a consciousness attached to it. But I also wouldn't risk "uploading my mind" into a computer, and then trusting that that worked, in the sense of creating a conscious copy of me. Maybe it wouldn't happen to have a consciousness attached to it.

Attempting to upload humans to computers and then letting the humans die out risks extinction of consciousness. How strictly will we be against taking such a risk when the day comes when it seems technically feasible? That's something that can vary culturally. The author of *X-Risk* makes out the prevention of extinction to be a serious responsibility which is up to us to take on. But what if our culture drifts so much, particularly through ease, that we just don't care, or don't care enough to hold back from taking the risk?

Another thing to consider is that cultural drift doesn't have to lead to a stark, conscious, official statement of "I am an antinatalist so I support the end of humanity" or "I am gungho to be subjugated" or "I am OK with humans dying out since I'm pretty sure computers can be conscious". Rather, for it to be a problem, there only has to be an erosion of people's determination, and an increased tendency for them to be confused. The more people are eroded and feel little stake, little capacity for outrage, in what goes on -- a fiducialism without connection to the best, perhaps -- the less they will be able to resist the small groups of people (or AI) who have other ideas for them. Likewise if they don't have their minds firmly made up, or don't have the capacity to hold onto their own beliefs, someone or something that wants to manipulate them can do so, to bend their minds to "willingly" support them.

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We might find the project of avoiding drift attractive as a kind of cultural engineering project. If we make it so that people believe what they need to in order to not choose death, without having to ground that guiding belief in truth, we might consider ourselves successful. But there is some danger in us forming a premature consensus that excludes God or perhaps some other important truth. Whatever history-invariant cultural constitution we decide on, we should decide on it because it is true.

We could see this as a project for everyone to work on: finding the truth of what values are really eternal. In the meantime, the government (and the other elites who lead society) would try to facilitate that process, without making up our minds for us.

Is cultural drift likely to be a problem? I'm not sure that it's the most likely problem, but to the extent that any of our problems are parameterized by human motivation, it seems like coming up with a solid, rational, intuitively and emotionally moving thought pattern to motivate action is called for anyway, and a moral realism is the kind of thing that can work in that role. If there is a 10% chance of cultural drift being a potential problem, then someone should care about it. And since culture is in the hands of everyone, it's something everyone can work on. Some other X-risks tend to require specialist training to directly work on their prevention, but not this one.

Labels: #civilization, #culture, #death, #futurism

Book Review Preview: Principles of Human Knowledge by George Berkeley

%book-review-preview-principles-of-human

Thursday, February 4, 2021

I've been meaning to read something by George Berkeley for a while. I have a copy of *Principles of Human Knowledge*, so I thought I would read that. I think Berkeley may support my project (in somewhat uninteresting ways -- not surprising because I based my project on what I'd heard about him), but also challenge it. For instance, Berkeley was against the reality of abstractions (I think?) and I am for them -- but maybe the sense in which Berkeley was against abstractions is not the same in which I am for them. Overall, I remember Berkeley as being someone into showing that everything is minds and ideas (I would say, persons and experiences). This is basically what I'm into.

One thing I am interested to see is his anti-material substance arguments.

Labels: #book review, #George Berkeley

Cartesian Starting Point

%cartesian-starting-point

Saturday, February 6, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional until I read Descartes.

Not having read Descartes, I will use his statement "I think, therefore I am."

I don't know about you, but if I doubt everything, one thing I can't doubt is my own existence. The past might not exist, the future might not. Other people may only be apparitions without souls, and I might be in a dream. But I exist. Since I am able to doubt, I know that I exist. Only existing things can doubt. Whatever goes into doubt is part of "I think", so emotions and sense perceptions are included.

The Cartesian starting point is this starting point of you, in the moment, as an experiencing subject. This is the most certain starting point for knowledge. Stories of God creating the world or evolution leading up to us are both distant from this starting point. Thoughts of the transhumanist or millennial future are also far away and unreal. The explanations given by science or the Bible are far away. It's not as though we can't cross the distance from here to all those distant things, but we have to start where we start.

When I think about "I think (/ experience) therefore I am" (and maybe it's the same for you), I see immediately in myself an *I* who is thinking. I am an immediate source of knowledge to myself. No matter what argument about personal identity might confuse me about the existence of me, I immediately know myself to exist in the moment, as a person. So we start off by knowing that reality is personal, and we have to do work if we want to try to claim it's anything else. (Reality is personal, and it is also experienced.)

Starting from this point, I can be an empiricist. I exist, and my experiences exist, and I can say what I see. From this, I can build up knowledge.

Labels: #epistemology, #philosophy, #what is a person?

Book Review Preview: The Orthodox Church by Timothy Ware

%book-review-preview-orthodox-church-by

Wednesday, February 10, 2021

Finished book review here.

Today I got a copy of *The Orthodox Church*, by Timothy Ware. It's the 1964 Pelican edition.

Having grown up in America, I had more casual occasion to encounter Catholic and various Protestant influences than Eastern Orthodox ones, when I was learning about the different interpretations people make of the Bible. So one reason to read this book is to fill a general gap in my knowledge.

More specifically, from what I've heard of Orthodox soteriology, it may be closest to New Wine soteriology of that of any existing church, and it would be very interesting to see what similarities or differences exist between the two. Motivational structure tends to follow from soteriology, and so if Orthodoxy has a somewhat New Wine-like soteriology, one would think that it ought to have a proportionately similar motivational structure. Eastern Orthodoxy is what it is, so if New Wine motivational structure is similar enough to the Orthodox one, then we would expect it, in practice, to be not much more or less effective than Orthdox motivation, all else being equal.

More generally again, it looks like *The Orthodox Church* is a history of doctrine, and thus might be a good way for me to consider the points of view of different eras of the church. There was only one, catholic / orthodox church for the first half of the church's history, so this accounts for a lot of theological thinking. Orthodox theological development post-Schism is interesting in itself and ought to have some similarities with the other branches of Christianity. I am curious to see what I think about traditional theology.

Labels: #book review, #Christianity

Reality is Law

%reality-is-law

Sunday, February 14, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional.

Let's say I'm walking on a trail that goes along the side of a canyon wall, so that there is a sheer slope above and a sheer slope below the trail. I come to a point where the trail is washed out, too wide for me to step across or safely jump. So, I have to go back. The wash-out ought to be there and compels my action.

I get back to town and can't find a place to sleep at night, so I sleep on the street. Around 2 AM, I am awakened by a police officer who says "You can't sleep on the streets. It's the law." I know that behind the police officer is the city ordinance. The city ordinance ought to be there and compels my action.

But perhaps it is unjust that the law exists? Why? Why isn't the wash-out unjust? Does it have a good reason to block me? What's the difference? Is it that a human enforces the law? Suppose we were hooked up Neuralink-style to all-powerful AI. And the AI would enforce the law of not-sleeping on the street by making it so that the pavement felt like it was burning hot, preventing sleep. Does that make it a just law? Is it that a human or group of humans designed the city ordinance, and so they can be held accountable, and that makes it just or unjust? Maybe we get used to not being able to argue with wash-outs, making them feel not unjust, whereas we are used to being able to argue with parents or siblings. But the law itself, is it just or unjust? Is it just to prevent people from sleeping on the streets?

Is racism suddenly okay if an AI comes up with it without any help from humans? (Is it okay if the AI isn't a general intelligence?) Sickle-cell anemia affects African-Americans more than other Americans. Should that be, just because humans didn't come up with it? You could say that it neither should be nor shouldn't be, because it just is, but then the fact of whether it should or shouldn't be can suddenly change if you find out that it wasn't due to human agency. But what we observe, simantically, is that ought is a question to ask of the thing we observe. *It* should or shouldn't be. Should its oughtness depend more on whether some human has happened to notice it, realizing they ought to take care of it? Or on its effects on whomever it comes into contact with?

Are humans morally accountable for what goes on on earth? Or are each of us the helpless pawns of the system? If the system makes things the way

they are, then maybe it's not a case of them "oughting" to be, or not, but rather they just are. But if we think that they should not be, then we approach them differently, we are really motivated to change the system. Some people protest the unjust system. They go after people in power, because ought resides in people. But other people try to work with the technological or policy sides of how the system is built. They aren't trying to hold anyone to account -- they are only trying to solve problems as impersonal phenomena. The system can be better, and they should be the ones to help make it better. Should the system be better? If it shouldn't, then it's bad that they make it better. If it neither should nor shouldn't, then why does the "should" fall on people to make it better? It would make a lot more sense if the system itself should be better, so that people should make themselves be the ones to make it better. If we suppose that human decisions are not the problem, rather it's erosion that produces wash-outs, then ought we still fix the wash-outs? It would seem so.

The wash-outs shouldn't be there. But, of course, in a sense, they should. We relate to the wash-outs as laws, just as we relate to systems, or the decrees of a city council. What kind of law can legitimately curtail our freedom? Reality is that which can curtail your freedom -- absolutely. Reality is a law. So what kind of law is valid? Is reality valid just because it is? Or do things, instead, exist because they are valid? Or their existence just is a particular kind of validity? That it should be is that it is.

A law can be valid, but not just because it is on the books. There is something else that makes a law valid. A law is valid "as law" if it really deserves to be on the books, and it is valid "as ordinance" if it has been written in the law books and is now being enforced.

What is is always at least somewhat valid, is really valid to some extent. Whatever really is, is absolutely. There is no arguing with it. Suppose that unarguable component were merely valid "as ordinance". If it were invalid "as law", it could be invalidated on that ground. In order to be really valid, it has to be valid "as law".

What, truly and ultimately, ought to be able to curtail a person's freedom, absolutely? What is it that allows reality to be real?

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We are tempted to say that the world is at root a natural, impersonal phenomenon, but if we say that, we lose the ability to most deeply feel the wrongness of earthquakes, (like the famous one in Lisbon), because we think that there is no personal cause to it. The earthquake itself is wrong, but this doesn't make sense to us if we think that it's just a couple of plates slipping past each other. And so the suffering that comes from the earthquake -- maybe we feel it should happen, just a little bit more than if we railed against God for having caused the earthquake.

But then, we approach social systems as though they are "plates slipping past each other". Having found it easy to accept the suffering of those affected by the brute occurrence of an earthquake, we accept the suffering of those affected by social systems. In either case, we might feel something, but not what we would have felt if we felt injustice. We live blanketed by "should be", by the breath of status quo.

We could say that "is" tells us that we shouldn't feel "ought". The naturalistic origin of the earthquake blunts our "ought". Or we could say that "ought" tells us that we should adjust our view of "is". "Ought" is a connection with reality, as much as "is" is, and can guide us to see that everything is caused by personal choice, and so there isn't a naturalistic world that is not justice-apt. Justice is everywhere. Everything is made out of justice, in that everything is made out of legitimacy. (Or twisted justice, twisted legitimacy -- that which we call unjust or illegitimate.)

Seeing everything through the lens of justice can be dangerous. Having reawakened our sense of justice, we might oppose people we shouldn't oppose, fanatically. Seeing things spiritually and seeing evil properly should help with this.

Labels: #morality, #ontology

News: 16 February 2021

%news-16-february-2021

Tuesday, February 16, 2021

Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday. I don't think I have ever celebrated Lent before, but I happen to have been feeling like I should take a break from social media for a few weeks now. Also from the rationalist/EA world. So I'm going to try to do that, and peg it to Lent. When Easter comes, I'll see if I want to go back.

I'll make exceptions, one of which is the subreddit that I started recently. (It's a place where I post links that I find interesting.) It is r/10v24.

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As you may have noticed, I started reading Berkeley's book on immaterialism and Timothy Ware's book on Eastern Orthodoxy. I haven't forgotten about Rawlette and Moynihan. Their reviews are close to being complete, I think. But I'm waiting for something, not sure what, before I finish and release them.

Labels: #news and meta

The Self-care System

%the-self-care-system

Thursday, March 4, 2021

Written in January of 2019, minor edits in 2021.

He walked along, lost in his thoughts, when a gang of five young men surrounded him.

"Are you a self-carer?" they asked.

"No," the man said.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to put myself first."

"Why's that? You think you're too good for us?" They stepped in closer.

"No", he said, by a force of will over his body shutting down.

"Believes in himself, doesn't he?" "Or God." "Same difference." "Well, we'll give him a reason for self-care."

They beat the man to the ground, kicking him and pummelling him, punching him in the kidneys over and over. They knew he was still alive, and then left him there.

No one came to rescue the man. He lay there, and thought, "Well, I guess I should go to the hospital".

The hospital, like all the hospitals, was run by the Self-carers. They welcomed him in. "I'm glad you took the step to come to us, out of love for yourself." He was confused as to whether he loved himself, although that might have been from the loss of blood. They sat him down in the triage line, knowing that he would live on, and gave him some paperwork to fill out.

When he got done with it, they came over to officiate the Oath.

"I do solemnly declare" he began, repeating after them, "That I always have and henceforward always will put my well-being first, and following from that, the well-being of my collective. And that God does not exist, otherwise he would have saved me, and that I renounce God and never did and never will serve him or love him all my life. So help me."

"We will help you", the doctors said. "Now come with us to the exam room." They diagnosed him with traumas, most notably serious kidney

damage.

"We're going to have to replace at least one of your kidneys. Fortunately we have a fresh boatload in from where we get them from."

"Where do you get them from?"

"Oh, from a faraway country where it's more economical to raise them."

"Okay, I guess that's what I'll have to go with", said the man.

"Great, you're going to do great", the doctors said.

They did the operation, and everything went well for the man. He got integrated into the self-care life, his confusion covered up with things making sense.

But one day he had a relapse, out on the edge of town. He started yearning. Not long it was before a man saw him yearning, read it from his body language, and started talking to him to get him to come close and be bound to him. Then the waiting man stabbed him in the chest and took his wallet.

While the man lay there, bleeding, he thought "I'd better go to the hospital again. I'm sure glad I put my well-being first." And he began to rouse himself.

But his yearning paralyzed him, fought with him. He tried his best to overcome his own heart, but his heart was too strong to let him walk steadily toward the hospital. He would have died.

But then a stranger approached. He had his own medical supplies and cared for the man's wound. The man wanted to thank him and be his friend, but the stranger looked around and said, "No, I can't let you do that. Community's watching. They want to suck me into them, and if I form a community with you, Community wins. I'm sorry, I have to go." "Wait, let me tell you about Self-care." So the helper stayed and heard.

"No, I still have to go. But you can unswear your oath to the Self-care people."

So he did, repeating after the helper. "My well-being is accidental to me, not essential. God is truer than life."

Labels: #mental health, #morality, #parable, #social connection

The Spirit is Not Just a Therapy

%the-spirit-is-not-just-therapy

Friday, March 5, 2021

Seeing Spiritually is to see according to the spirit of God, to really see as though God exists. Is the Spirit of God solely concerned with therapy, or is he also concerned with holiness and righteousness, and caring about other people? Does the Spirit of God care if you care about God? If the Spirit of God only appears like therapy to you, then maybe you have only really cried out for therapy, and not for holiness and righteousness, and altruism. So you have only opened up a receptor in you for the therapy of the Spirit of God to fill, and the Spirit is only therapy to you.

Labels: #altruism, #God, #holiness, #Holy Spirit, #mental health, #note, #psychology

Book Review and Postview: The Orthodox Church by Timothy Ware

%book-review-and-postview-orthodox

Tuesday, March 23, 2021

I finished *The Orthodox Church* by Timothy Ware (1964 Pelican edition). I don't have a lot to say about it, in general. Here are my thoughts in answer to the preview for this book review:

What I was most interested to learn was whether Orthodox soteriology is essentially identical to New Wine soteriology. I wasn't 100% sure I could tell whether it was or not. The New Wine motivational structure (at least, as I understand the New Wine System) seems like it might be out of character with Orthodoxy. And I would think that if Orthodoxy had a motivational structure as striking as that of the New Wine System, Ware would have mentioned that. But I will have to do more reading to explore. Ware was giving an overview of Orthodox doctrine rather than a very detailed one.

Because it was an overview, I didn't get a very detailed account of theology through the ages, as I hoped. I think I got a flavor of Orthodoxy, and that's a helpful thing for the time being. I got some thought out of icons, liturgy, and creeds, relatively undeveloped as subjects for me due to my upbringing.

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PS.

I looked up these Orthodox links (Orthodox Christian Theology OrthodoxWiki on soteriology Wikipedia on theosis Orthodox Road OrthodoxWiki on theosis) and also these anti-Orthodox links (CARM easternorthodoxchristian.com), on soteriology and theosis. There was no clear statement for or against the New Wine ideas that we have to overcome all of our sinful habits before we enter into God's rest, and that we will be provided a period of time (generous-but-limited in New Wine thinking) in which to complete that process. Nor did I see the idea that people are at risk of hardening, also found in the New Wine System. These didn't come up in either of the critical websites, which I think both try to propound orthodox Protestantism. Arguably, the New Wine System is orthodox Protestantism, though it is not traditional Protestantism. I am not

certain but would guess that they would find New Wine System doctrines of concern, and so would flag them if found in Eastern Orthodoxy. So I am somewhat certain that New Wine motivational structure is either not present in Eastern Orthodoxy, or that if it is, it's only a (sociologically) minor opinion, not the mainstream or historic opinion of the church. From that I would think it is substantially or wholly untried (by Orthodoxy at least). I wouldn't put my certainty in this opinion too high, low enough that I still feel like reading more about Orthodox theology (maybe a book by Lossky?) to be very sure. But I can let that go for the time being.

Labels: #book review, #Christianity

News: 4 April 2021

%news-4-april-2021

Sunday, April 4, 2021

My Lent (or quasi-Lent) is over today, on Easter. It was a time of adjusting my thinking -- getting some distance.

Fasting from social media and the rationalist/EA world was liberating at first. Then I became hungry. Then I got past the hunger. Roughly two weeks for each phase.

I think I will still read rationalist and EA things but not as much. Otherwise probably post as often to social media, but maybe not read it as much.

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I moved my website off of Neocities, but still had 10v24.neocities.org. So I made it into this.

Labels: #news and meta

When Does a Free Decision Happen?

%when-does-free-decision-happen

Monday, April 5, 2021

Naively, (ordinaristically), when I make just about any action, it feels like *I* am making that action. I want to say that the ordinaristic is reality, and so there we have an understanding of "free will". *I*, myself, choose to do something, and I know this intuitively. Anything any ontologistic person says to the contrary is in some sense false.

Not all actions that I perform feel like they are of me. Speaking for myself, I would say that there is a distribution where far on the left tail there are a few outlier moments that do not feel like me at all, which are some kind of possession, and a few outlier moments far on the right, where I 100% make a choice, in a moment of pure decision. Most of life is somewhere in the center part, where I am more, or less, automatic and more, or less, voluntary. It's easy for me to bracket off the far left experiences, and then I want to say that all the rest are me.

But a psychologist (whether a scientist working with instruments and data, or an empath working with ordinaristic observations and intuitions) could predict my behavior, and predict the free decision before I (who am inherently conscious) experienced it. In this podcast, Lisa Feldman Barrett (or Sean Carroll? -- one of the two) mentions that heart rate goes up before you stand up. The brain works ahead of the moment. Suppose the rate went up before I consciously decided to stand up. Then we would have evidence that I didn't make the decision.

From another angle, suppose that I have made my choice to pursue my ultimate value. There are many things of worth to choose from, but I have chosen (have been called by, and have answered) heirloom tomatoes. (I turned down ziggurats and frequentist statistics, among many other competitors for the position in my heart, or in the seat of my ambition). Now my whole life is governed by the search for, and consumption of, heirloom tomatoes. Because I have fully committed to heirloom tomatoes, every decision that I could ever make has been made for me. It would seem that I have no free will.

However, in every moment, I continue to affirm heirloom tomatoes. Mangos appear on the kitchen counter, but I turn aside from them to eat the heirloom tomato that is my ration of glory for the day. I continually affirm that I have my value of heirloom tomatoes, and that is a kind of

choice. Sometimes that choice is tested more intensely. Maybe the price of heirloom tomatoes has gone up by 100% and I see that I will have to cut back in some other part of my life. Maybe someone enters my life and I (seemingly) fall in love, and my new love wants me to appreciate her instead of heirloom tomatoes. If I continue to live my life like a machine, seeking heirloom tomatoes, then in that moment where I wrestle between my lover and my tomatoes, whom shall I serve? -- I have chosen heirloom tomatoes. An outside observer might be able to predict me perfectly, based on the simple formula "1) Utility equals finding and consuming heirloom tomatoes; 2) Maximize utility." But in order for me to have been so predictable, I had to make perhaps an arbitrarily large number of decisions (every day, putting my shoes on in the best way so that I can go out and make money to buy heirloom tomatoes), decisions which were somewhat automatic through habit, and which were easy to make; as well as a few decisions of intense concentration, as I chose which way to go, as I fought the intensity of the pull of frequentist statistics, ziggurats, and romantic love.

Let's return to the psychologist who can accurately predict my free willed decisions before I am aware of them (and thus before I can make them). I would guess that what may be going on is that the decision as to what I will do, say, or think, is indeed made for me before it enters my consciousness. But whether or not that decision is *mine* has to do with whether I consciously affirm it. So my behaviors that are out on the left tail of the distribution of intentionality aren't me at all -- I've been possessed. But if my preferences were different, they would have been me. Granted that many behaviors flow in and out of my body and consciousness, I do have reflective moments where I can choose (moments that are further to the right of the distribution), where I can choose to shape what my preferences are. So if I store up now, in a moment a year from now I will freely choose a certain thing, affirm it as my own in a split second, even if the decision was one that my body was making before I knew what was going on, and it was one that followed perfectly from the machinery of my life's events, like a juggernaut plowing into a giant pool of water. My affirmation that something was of me, or my disaffirmation, can affect the decisions and actions I make in the future.

Labels: #psychology, #what is a person?

Pragmatism Against Sin

%pragmatism-against-sin

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

The thought of sin can be obsessing. A sin separates you from God. But obsession over sin can also do that. So at some point, the obsession with sin does more harm to your relationship with God than the sin itself. Sometimes the best thing to do for your relationship with God is to call on him and rely on him only. Other times the best thing to do is to pragmatically treat your sin or obsession over sin. Society will tend to reinforce "be pragmatic" and not "trust in God, love God". So you can't rest in pragmatism like society tends to. But pragmatism is a part of life.

Labels: #mental health, #note, #pragmatism, #psychology, #trust

Pre-hardening

%pre-hardening

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

Hardening is a risk that each of us faces. We can choose to permanently reject God -- but who does that in this life? So it might seem that we can't contribute to others' hardening in this life.

Hardening is a decision which is preceded, as with many decisions, with deliberation and the cultivation of taste. In the time period of deliberation, we hear things from other people that can affect our decision-making. These words work in us, and we amplify them within ourselves. We certainly can't be said to have decided one way or another. And yet in the moment of stress, we make some kind of decision, which perhaps was latent in us beginning at some point in the deliberation process. We had some kind of pattern of behavior worked up in ourselves when we deliberated, which can then take over us in the moment of decision. When was that decision really made? At the "moment of truth"? Or long before, when we were deliberating? So though it may seem as though we are far from positively rejecting God, we may be preparing ourselves to reject him in the future, and that preparation itself is a kind of pre-hardening, which is the decisive danger.

If you worry about your salvation and do not know that you have rejected God, you haven't, but your deliberation may still have put you in danger. There is still time to amplify the part of you who loves and trusts God fully, and desires to come into tune with his preferences fully by overcoming all of your sinful habits.

Labels: #life choices, #note, #psychology, #trust

Book Review: X-Risk by Thomas Moynihan

%book-review-x-risk-by-thomas-moynihan

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

22 April 2021: see this addendum.

16 June 2022: this post contains a section about this post, with an update partially in favor of some criticized aspects of transhumanism.

See also this review's preview and postview.

I would characterize *X-Risk*, by Thomas Moynihan, as a kind of sermon exhorting people to take X-risk more seriously, perhaps becoming "longtermist" effective altruists. He "preaches" by talking about the history of ideas that led up to our realizing that (as it appears), we are completely responsible for maintaining all that is good, for even the possibility of having the perception of anything as good, having any kind of concept of goodness. Thus, we must do whatever is in our power to avoid X-risks. X-risks are "existential risks", which threaten the existence of human civilization or even the human species itself.

I am not competent to judge history writing (in terms of being able to be critical of his use of evidence). I did find the book to be fairly well-written. Moynihan obviously gets some enjoyment out of writing (for instance, his humorous section titles and the panache with which he says things like "not the *sense of an ending*, but the *ending of sense*").

As to the history, I did appreciate learning about concepts like plenitude, seeing the non-biblical but non-modern worldview that was replaced by modern science. Also it was interesting to see how far back people were seeing trends develop that we're still in the grips of. (For instance, seeing humans as parasites on their machines, and machines as parasites on us.) Things that a few people saw generations ago, but which generally were not discussed and were not decisively addressed, as though people just forgot about them in the course of living their lives.

I do agree with Moynihan that the future is something worth investing in, and I generally agree that avoiding various kinds of existential risks is a good thing. In order to explain why I give this book three stars instead of four, I mention that I disagree with Moynihan's worldview. I don't think that expansionary values are obviously better than those of rest, nor that humans (individually or collectively) are in any (implicit or explicit) sense

obligated to try to live forever, unless there is something outside human judgment that compels us to keep living even if we don't feel like doing the work to make it happen. I do think that Moynihan's point of view does well as an atheistic rationale for motivating work -- at least for many atheists. But not everyone is an atheist.

If Moynihan's basic project is to motivate people to pursue a vision of superlative human well-being in the far future, requiring that they oppose X-risks, I think that human well-being is better described by (a certain kind of) theism, valuing quality of people more than quality of people's lives, and that theistic metaethics / motivational structure stands a chance of motivating the average person (and even many of the not-so-average people who are probably Moynihan's intended audience, or adjacent to it) to care about superlativeness, motivating action, while atheistic metaethics / motivational structure does not. Moynihan may wish to arouse a sense of value by describing some sort of superlative future we could someday bring about, and a sense of "iniquity" if we don't, but I find that I don't really care about what he says, and that I don't have to. But this is not as true if I am concerned what an active and worthy God thinks, or one who will respond negatively to me if I don't care.

I think Moynihan may hope for a future atheistic moral realism to present itself, but absent that hoped-for realism, what I see left is moral anti-realism that's vulnerable to us hacking our own biology to rewrite our moral intuitions to something cheap and convenient, so that we can maximize some variable we choose (likely for its maximizability), on the one hand; or, on the other, (a certain kind of) theistic realism which holds a higher view of human nature (higher than being wireheads, certainly) as being necessary for human survival on some level, and thus something that we must include in what we try to maximize. (I'm also aware of one attempted atheistic moral realism, that of Sharon Hewitt Rawlette, which (I think) if adopted implies that we should wirehead to produce the positive normative qualia she favors.)

Perhaps Moynihan hopes that the hoped-for atheistic moral realism never needs to be brought to light -- even if one doesn't exist, we can hope that there will be one, and the hope will get us to do whatever Moynihan thinks is good. But people might just say "Well, I want to do what I want to do, so let me know if there's ever a moral realism that actually constrains that". Certainly some people may say that theistic moral realism is tangible and present (if someone can offer one), and prefer that, and to the extent that that conflicts with Moynihan's axiology, then it might come to fruition in contradiction to him.

It occurs to me that Moynihan may not really care what the majority of people think, but only those who might form the elite that can do anything about X-risk. Perhaps most people will only be consumers in the future, patients but not agents. Will they still be voters? If they are

disenfranchised, then there is some risk that the elite will lord it over the non-elite, a risk factor for the abuse or annihilation of the non-elite. The average person should have some power, and thus needs to understand why X-risk matters. Therefore it is best if we have an ideology that motivates the greatest number of people to avoid X-risk.

Thinking pragmatically, perhaps it is best to offer atheistic anti-X-risk ideologies to those atheists who can (or will only) be motivated by them, and theistic ideologies to those who can (or will only) be motivated by those. Perhaps there need to be ideologies based in each of the major religions.

For more detail on what I think about this book, see these notes below, which I took while reading. (They also get into my own intellectual project.)

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X-Risk notes

[Quotes from Moynihan set off by --.]

p. 11 --And the more we accept responsibility for this truth, the more we are compelled to do what is prudent and righteous within the world of the present.--

A way I might put this is "good futurism makes for a good present". I agree broadly with Moynihan that if we are to have a future, it has to come from a better sense of history, of having a project as civilization.

[I would suggest the project of seeking kinship with God, being set apart to God (holiness). My idea of God being this.]

p. 22 --There is untold scope for self-improvement, self-exploration, and self-expression across such time frames, in ethics as much as politics, in the arts as much as in the sciences. Our current capacities to do good, to pursue justice, to comprehend nature, and to produce beauty may be just a vanishing fraction of our full potential.--

Moynihan is painting a picture of high expected value, if we should manage to not kill ourselves off. In what way could we really have "untold scope for self-improvement, self-exploration, and self-expression, across such time frames, in ethics as much as politics, in the arts as much as in the sciences."? I can see that we could pile up works of art and scientific discoveries, but why would we care? And ethics and politics are both things that it seems like you would just want to get right, from which point they could only get worse, like how you cease to be able to climb higher than the peak of a mountain, and can only go down if you want to change your location.

Could we care about piles and piles of art and science? Maybe if we modified ourselves to care. At some point, there's something silly about that. We are trying to create meaning (one meaning of "meaning", importance to us) apart from meaning (the other meaning of "meaning", communication from the ultimate). We avoid reality (that communication) in favor of wealth. Moynihan talks about our great responsibility. But the future he looks forward to is one where most or all people would lose touch with reality, and instead live in dream worlds engineered to be superlative by the standards humans naturally fall for. If there is a God, and that is a real possibility, we should be concerned about hearing from him (God). He is the being in which ultimate reality has its concrete ontological instantiation. Therefore a vision of human-engineered superlativeness is risky, if we do not also listen for God.

[Re: silly self-modification. Progress Quest is a game where you leave your computer running and your character keeps on leveling up without you doing anything. Before Progress Quest, it used to be that playing, putting in attention, got you a level up. And a level up felt like an accomplishment. So surely, leveling up is what makes the game good? Similarly, getting cool items that make you more effective makes a game good. So Progress Quest just gives you the cool items and levels, more and more. So on a certain level, we are playing Progress Quest with ourselves when we engineer ourselves to like more and more art and science and whatever, the things which are civilization will provide in abundance. We choose to play an easy game, setting ourselves up to be rewarded without having to go through the inner motions that accompany accomplishment, which are, to recognize reality and rise up to meet it. The engineers and the engineered alike play an easy game in their respective pursuits. The inner motions are a personal reality. The engineers who make people such that they fit into a world of easy rewards knowingly avoid the personal reality, even if the engineered don't know what they're missing. One way around this, if we absolutely have to engineer reality, is to engineer a reality of frightfulness and the desert experience for people to go through, not knowing it's only a simulation -- but we can make it a different kind of frightful and a different kind of dry, so that it does not have the evil consequences that life can have on people as personal beings, in our world where we can have a kind of raw, chaotic and even evil frightfulness and dryness.]

> *10 July 2021*: Why would giving people frightful and dry experiences connect them with meaning, or reality? I think the MSLN answer is that God is present in all conscious experience, and can speak to us through all conscious experience, but it is possible that his register of communication is limited by the kind of experiences we actually have. From another angle, our spiritual development

> is incomplete if we do not learn to trust. We can't come to trust fully if we do not learn to trust (to the extent that is possible) frightening or dry experiences. While God can always cause us to experience these things after this liife, if we grow to love pleasure or other psychological wealth too much in this one, we may close ourselves off to the experience of dryness or fear or pain or whatever, and may find it easier to close down on idols which get between us and really loving God. Some of us may choose those idols rather than God and reject God permanently. Ease can be like plaque that eventually becomes calculus on teeth. Without the calculus, we can hear God. As above, not all frightfulness or dryness (or pain, etc.) leads to trusting on a deep level. So there may be some room to improve on the brutal, wild status quo.

p. 43 --This brings us neatly to the core claim of this book: that the discovery of human extinction may well prove to have been the very centrepiece of that unfolding and unfinished drama that we call modernity. Because, in discovering our own extinction, we realised that we must think ever better because, should we not, then we may never think again.--

Moynihan may get into this later (a page later, he mentions a future chapter on "extinction is the inevitable culmination of technological modernity"), but it occurs to me to point out that the insecurity that makes humans think harder makes them think hard enough to come up with anthropogenic X-risks. [When we think harder, for instance come up with basic research, we feed uncontrolled or insufficiently-controlled competitive dynamics which are why we have anthropogenic X-risks. You have to have all of technology or none of it, more or less.]

And anthropogenic X-risks are the most urgent. We could have had a history where we solved our social problems, and thus didn't have Molochian dynamics pushing us. (Apparently Moloch was not as strong in the pre-Enlightenment days, since we didn't have to think as hard, lulled by theistic and perennialistic assumptions.) At some point in the future, we could have devised the technology to ward off asteroids or survive supervolcanoes.

Which would be better, to spend 10,000 years overcoming Moloch through cultural change, and then turning our attention toward asteroids and the like, or our current course, where we figure out technology without adjusting human nature first? A lot depends on how much we really could accomplish through culture alone in adjusting human nature, and how strong culture can be in the face of warfare. [Warfare being able to

conquer "nicer" civilizations, though they are superior in the sense of being more humane to themselves. So conquering cultures supplant humane ones, at least in principle.] Culture is enough of what makes a person who they are that it seems like *maybe* culture could create a society immune-enough from Moloch.

We could say that the Enlightenment was the moment when humanity really started going crazy with fear, and it seemed like we might drive ourselves to death in our unstable state. Whether this craziness was a necessary part of our development (the view that culture couldn't have tamed Moloch) or unnecessary, is an empirical question that we may not be able to answer. But if in some unexpected way, we find a way to make culture stronger than technology, we could prove that Moloch can be tamed by culture. And if we find a way to believe in God, we see that the Enlightenment was the moment where we ran away from our father, taking our inheritance with us, out on our own in the world, trying to make it without him. [Is it really a mark of maturity to reject your parents? Maybe we should see Enlightenment maturity as a somewhat sad thing. Even if atheism is correct, we *have to* live in the world we live in, and while the Enlightenment sense of maturity has its good points, and, on atheism, may simply be the truth, something that's always valuable, there's something sad about us, striving so hard to live.]

[Maybe a more defensible way to try to argue this point would be to say that theistic and perennialistic assumptions, or ones which might tend to go with them -- the overall sense that things work out in the end, the sense that things do not change, the sense that there is justice inherent in the universe and so we couldn't (as much) imagine abusing people and being abused, the sense that there really is a way things should be which we can expect of humans -- were things that we increasingly lost in the modern era. As we lost our old beliefs (our relationship with God), we entered a precarious world, where we used our freedom to try to maximize our wealth and power, and also increased our anxiety, a process (the maximizing and increasing) that is out of our control. The world always had some element of the "there is no God -- rejoice in your freedom (to do good and bad), and be afraid (of bad people or blind circumstance)", but it had the theistic and perennialistic (and other similar, I suppose) things as somewhat of a counterweight.]

pp. 94 - 95 --A key driver behind the philosophy of the Enlightenment was a growing realisation that moral values are questions of **self-legislation**. That is, we do not inherit them unquestioningly from divine fiat or the state of nature. We render them through our own -- fallible and revisable -- search for what is right. What, after all, is any 'decree' that is not the result of our own deliberation, except for an imposition of arbitrary -- and thus immoral -- force? The key idea of the Enlightenment was this: only that which has been given a justifying reason is to be considered as legitimate

-- in belief as in action, in epistemology as in ethics, in science as in politics.

This master idea of the Age of Reason reached its culmination in Kant's mature philosophy of the 1780s and 1790s, where Kant realized that values are maxims by which we elect to bind ourselves and are, accordingly, always dependent upon this ongoing election. Such values are not part of the furniture of the natural world -- they do not exist apart from our active upholding and championing of them. This entails that our values are *entirely our own responsibility*, and that we are accountable for everything we care about and cherish.--

But why should anyone care about the above paragraph enough to inconvenience themselves? Our culture has a kind of nihilist strain to it. Is that less valid than Moynihan's urgings that we be responsible? It's the product of his reason, the way he deliberates -- he feels a certain way and therefore acts on it. Maybe he will make a case for moral realism in this book (such as Rawlette's). But if he doesn't, and to the extent that that's a controversial topic, people will take the self-legislating option to be anti-realists, and then, if they do not happen to feel like saving the world, they won't.

Moynihan strikes me as being like a preacher. He uses turns of phrase (like his "instead of the *sense of an ending*, the *ending of sense*" device) like a preacher would. Moral anti-realism breeds preaching. The preacher has to use the force of rhetoric to move his or her audience, to create the inner urges that cause them to have the same moral values as the preacher. If not, something terrible will happen -- from the preacher's perspective.

[Part of the notes starting here seemed about equally relevant to Rawlette's project, so I split them off for easier linking. See here.]

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It's possible to want humans to care about getting whatever it is they care about. But, do the things we care about really matter? Is it that when we care, we are of the opinion that something really matters? I think so. But then, does it really matter, in fact? Is there any way a thing can inherently matter, in an absolute way, apart from human judgment?

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"Teaching children to care" [I have a book by that title, by Ruth Sidney Charney, which I intend to read someday] -- instilling reason in people who might not naturally have it -- are these educative acts justifiable? If we know the value of reason, then they may be. If by reason we see that reason is valid and implies certain things, we can teach it and its deliverances to those who are irrational or nihilistic, using means other than reason (since irrational and nihilistic people aren't interested in

reason). Unfortunately, this sounds like it is justified or even obligatory to use relatively impolite means of inculcating reason and caring, by contrast with the relative politeness of reason. So there is additional nuance needed, to not traumatize people as we teach them apart from reason.

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Plenitude is a potestas clavium [term taken from Lev Shestov's *Potestas Clavium*], [in the limited sense of] a reason which is taken to save. If it is a comforting illusion, then it does so based on the prestige of reason. People who trust in reason, at least to some extent, are the ones who need comforting reasons, as opposed to just not caring about, for instance, the cold sterility of space and the utter contingency of human evolution and culture.

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[A gap of a month or two between writing the above and what follows.]

p. 349

[Whether he intends to or not,] Moynihan seems to offer a constitution for culture [to prevent cultural drift as X-risk], such that the thing that we most know to be true morally is to preserve moral agents, and if we follow this, we know what to do for the rest of our existence. (my addition:) This is the thing that we can all agree on as right, and so it may not be necessary to figure out something like moral realism vs. anti-realism. As long as there's the possibility of there being some kind of value, which we suppose can only be within the minds of humans or other sentient beings, then to preserve those minds would seem to be worth perhaps full commitment, something we could know firmly, producing an outpouring of effort.

I think maybe this meta-morality axiology ("moral agent survival necessary, all else serving this") is a "One True Axiology", a moral realism, although one that is somewhat open-ended. It would seem to be the default choice for atheists in selecting a constitution for human society.

["One True Axiology" comes from Lukas Gloor's sequence on moral anti-realism.]

But if value is only in our minds, is it real? Does value itself need to be treated with great reverence? Or could value be like a pile of old one dollar bills? -- trash, basically. What grounds value itself? That is, the value of the perception of value in human minds. Maybe, as anti-realists, we don't care about such things, and just want our desires fulfilled, with respect to value itself.

Is there a good reason for an atheist to not be a nihilist? Atheists might personally prefer not to be, but is that supported by reason? If not, then

the meta-morality moral realism has an Achilles' heel.

[Meta-morality moral realism has its greatest force given an atheistic background. Theism can play the role of perennialism in blunting the meta-moral responsibility: keeping alive some kind of moral agents so that those agents can figure out what morality is someday. Assuming that atheism becomes an intellectual monoculture, it could produce both responsibility, like Moynihan's, among those who care, and nihilism, among those who don't care. Some people feel like caring no matter what, some people don't feel like caring, no matter what you try to get them to believe, but there are a lot of people in the middle, for whom a good moral realism might shift their perspective and make them care more. And given that (perhaps through genetic engineering) we will have the ability to choose how much people care, we will have to ask "should we care?" If there isn't really a solid reason why we should care, why, for instance, even the idea of value should matter, or the vocation of metamorality (keeping burning the torch of someday figuring out what morality really is) should matter, then what will we decide? And we may have the question come up for our culture as a whole over and over, once every few generations.]

[I suppose a caring atheist could engineer everyone to care meta-morally, because it fits the atheist's preferences. Note that this closes off one of the possible answers that a moral agent could come up to define what morality is -- that morality doesn't matter, or that it is moral to leave everyone to their own judgments about morality, even if that allows them to be nihilistic with respect to survival. By engineering desirable outcomes, you run the risk of closing yourself off to reality. Maybe the moral intuition to just let things happen and not control things, or to trust the universe, or even the lack of moral intuition, are all signals from some deeper reality. Is there a good reason why the urgent responsibility to preserve meta-moral ability is better than those? It seems like we need the fruits of meta-morality to really justify it. And who knows what morality is other than people more or less as they are now, with their various more or less natural moral intuitions? Similarly, a caring atheist with the ability to engineer people to care may feel like lopping off inconvenient aspects of human cognition while they're at it, like the capacity to believe in God. But maybe we are like antennae for hearing from God -- at least, many of us are.]

[Maybe more realistic (or graspable) by someone like me or Moynihan, is the more immediate situation where persuasion is not yet dominated by bioengineering, and people need to be roused not from stark, pure nihilism, but from a kind of low-key mix of nihilism and caring about what is present to them (rather than distant or future people), which seems like a plausible description of most well-adjusted people in our culture, both atheists and theists. How do you rouse those people to go beyond what is

required into what would seem to them to be supererogatory before they grasp its necessity? That seemingly supererogatory thing being to care about X-risk.]

Another Achilles' heel would be, why do we have to care about reason? If we can arbitrarily disregard reason, then we can have whatever culture we want, for good or ill [this freedom allowing for cultural drift as X-risk]. I suppose any ideology is vulnerable to this. Is there a reason within atheistic meta-morality moral realism to compel people to be rational? [Maybe the struggle to survive does. But there are utopian reasons for us to forget that struggle.]

In MSLN, rationality is enforced by, if you're not looking for the truth, you might miss God, and if you throw away truth because you want to, you might be closing yourself off to God's voice, in danger of hardening and losing your personal salvation. It appears from the Bible that there is a punishment you will experience if by your self-closing to reality, you fail to fully grow up in God. So it is instrumentally rational for individual humans to be epistemically rational and thus more-expansively-instrumentally rational / altruistic. It's still possible to ignore this rationality-enforcement, but I think the warning reaches further into the pool of people who might need to hear it.

[MSLN is a set of natural theological arguments that I begin to propose. It has implications for motivation and meaning. Another, perhaps better, way to explain MSLN's position on reason is to say "If you ignore reason, you might not find God. If you have found God, you may need reason to be in tune with him." But I would add that there are practical limits on a person's ability to pursue reason, and that it is possible that in the search for more knowledge, the further application of reason, you neglect seeking to love and trust God, or fall into or fail to address some kind of already-known sin. Nevertheless, having a disposition that disregards reason (whatever your ability to exercise reason is) is dangerous, both for the non-believer and the believer.]

[People are rational in the sense of common sense, without help, but to say "I'm going to apply common sense consistently and rigorously" (which might be just what reason is) is something that is hard to do and generally not done, nor that all aspire to.]

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Also, I could see a civilization deciding that value was very important, but that the finitude of civilization was very important, of inestimable value, of greater value than the continuance of it. (Why not locate value outside human psychology and thus its continuance?) This might be the [or a] anti-natalist way to counter the meta-morality moral realism.

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Having a moral philosophy that is all about the survival of moral agents through time could lend itself to a Temporal Repugnant Conclusion: for every good civilization there is a civilization barely worth instantiating which lasts longer. [Maybe a better point to make would be that there's at least theoretically a tradeoff between the longevity of a civilization and its quality. So if we think "avoid X-risk at all costs" we might have to sacrifice something -- like conflict or struggle (to protect us from Moloch), or perhaps in some resource-saving way (austerity to save resources; or simplifying humans so that they are happy with less, at the expense of their capabilities).]

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pp. 380 - 382

This section mentions that love and altruism come from nature, but they just blindly evolved. Why should we think that love and altruism are all that great? Why are they more meaningful than the tendency of water to drip from trees, or for species to go extinct? Why not say that extinction and fluid dynamics are of inestimable worth? Or say that nothing is of inestimable worth except what we feel like saying it is? [And so working hard to protect civilization isn't worth it if we don't feel like it's worth it.]

The MSLN answer is to say that worth itself (legitimacy) is what everything is made out of, and it is a person, about whom we can know some things. The things that truly would be of worth to it, are, and they are necessarily -- worth itself declares them worthy.

pp. 414 - 416

This section talks about (I think) turning humans into art- and game- -making and -consuming machines. In my personal life, I have been fortunate (or not) enough to have a lot of free time, and I have had my fill of art and games. I have been fortunate (or not) enough to be able to make art and games, and I have also had my fill of doing that. I need to pass time, and so I keep doing things. But I don't have a deep need to do things, I think from having had my fill. When I was younger, I could get into these things, but now I'm older. I think this might be considered maturity (although I don't think of it as true maturity). Why isn't this [having had my fill] maturity just as good as the maturity of "tiling the universe" with art and games, making super sure that we can do this for the maximum amount of time?

[On further reflection, I would say "I try to find, for instance, music, with which I might form some kind of connection and I begin to succeed sometimes, so maybe I haven't had my fill. But compared to my younger self, and on a deeper level, I have."]

Maybe in some objective sense, more is better, like in Total Utilitarianism.

There's a total utilitarianism of artworks. But who really cares?

We might be made to care, for objective reasons (X artworks are good; the creative processes of making X artworks are good; so 10^100 artworks must be so much better), but why? And if we do make people into the kind of people who care about that thing our society was engineered to bring about, that's like making a video game where if you click "OK" on the dialogue box on the opening screen you win and get 148,297,237,923 points. We would have engineered ourselves to be easily pleased. We could have gotten that result cheaply, with some simple wireheading, without bothering with art. And, Repugnant Conclusion-fashion, we could generate even more "win states" if we go with the cheap version, even more (apparent) moral value.

[Once we start to engineer things (including humans), if we get good enough, we might as well wirehead, unless there's some reason why we wouldn't. We can engineer the definition of "win state", make anything seem like a win to humans that we want. Moynihan might say that the point of continuing civilization is so that someday we can figure out how values really work, and thus come up with that reason. As though there's something outside human engineering that ought to constrain human engineering. Is there an atheistic reason that's solid enough to prevent wireheading? Rawlette's moral realism isn't quite. (Maximizing qualia of "ought-to-be-ness" / minimizing qualia of "ought-not-to-be-ness" seems like something wireheading could accomplish, and would accomplish more cheaply even than an experience machine.)]

[Maybe another way to put all this is: 1. Is value human-judgment-dependent? 1. a. If yes, then we can engineer value itself and if we are trying to maximize some variable, we should define value so that it can be instantiated as cheaply and numerously as possible. 2. Is value human-judgment-independent? a. We need some kind of moral realism. Does Rawlette's work? No, it's as vulnerable to wireheading (generating positive normative qualia is potentially very cheap, and she recommends simple aggregation of value). b. Is there another atheistic moral realism that can avoid wireheading? c. Should we bite the bullet and wirehead? d. If neither b. or c. work, are we left with theistic moral realism?]

["Human-judgment-dependent" comes from Rawlette's "judgment-dependent". The impression I got from her book is that there is a clear distinction between moral realism and moral anti-realism. For her, moral realism is not judgment dependent, while moral anti-realism is. But then I read Gloor's sequence on moral anti-realism (as much as has been written as of end of 2020), and now I am not so sure there is a clear distinction, at least that Gloor's version isn't clearly distinct from realism. Maybe it's anti-realist to not be clearly anti-realist. Nevertheless, the question remains, in terms of the risk of wireheading, is Gloor's anti-realism effectively human-judgment-dependent or not? Can a person hack the outputs of "what is

moral?" (as processed by his kind of anti-realism) by changing human biology? And not just in the sense that if all thinkers recognize X as valuable, X is effectively valuable, but in the sense of "what is moral?" in some sense ought to be tied to human judgments, and those judgments can then be bioengineered?]

[Biocultural change takes time. By leaving the meta-moral process running longer, it's more vulnerable to drift or engineering. So it might be good to bring it to a close sooner rather than later, choose a motivational structure / find the true moral realism.]

We might want some analogue to MSLN's population ethics (the rest view), for the value of artworks.

One thing that we lose out on with an easier and nicer, even if creative [make lots of games and art] rather than narcotic [wireheading], future, is the capabilities of human beings, the moral capabilities. Humans are currently capable of undergoing childbirth to bring humans into the world, going mad alone for the sake of the truth or art, of living lives of stress and fear to resist corrupted social orders, or of willingly suffering, experiencing psychological defeat, and dying, for the sake of other people. The altruism of the cleaned-up future, whether the other for which we live altruistically is human, intellectual, or aesthetic, is pale in comparison to these things.

At the end of the movie, you can ask "was it a happy ending because the heroine got what she wanted, or because she was good, herself?" That's the question I asked myself after watching the great X-risk movie *Testament*, from 1983. I thought the movie had a happy ending [in a sense] in that the protagonist acquitted herself well, although by conventional standards suffering through a hopeless situation (humanity dying out from fallout after a nuclear war). [This "acquitting ourselves well" requires that we really be put to the test. Utopia tends to prevent this.] We may be unable to resist lives of ease and pleasantness, but at least we could recognize that we have lost what was truly greatest in humanity, in our idyllic future.

It's true that the cruelty and brutality of the cross is something that we shy away from, and to an extent, rightly so. But I think we could have a society that is in some sense "millennial", if not heavenly, where people themselves genuinely learn to value what is good, learning lessons that are bitter, but only bitter if necessary for learning, and for which they get adequate support. (This world may be what is depicted in the second part of "The Future of Beauty".)

[This millennial world one in which people themselves are brought up to some kind of standard, where value resides in people themselves.]

["Millennial" comes from the Millennium in Christian eschatology, a time where people are taught morally / spiritually so that they can be fit for heaven.]

[I think Moynihan might reply to this whole section on art and game making / consuming, something like: "If you find yourself teleported in time to the far future where everything is art and games, you certainly don't have to participate", although he could take what he said on p. 416 as the opposite of that:

> --Instead of creating 'dead semblances of what has passed away' or 'simulations' of the currently flawed universe, art could be the genuine restitution of all the wasted opportunities that past extinctions and deaths represent. In this, intelligence will finally have justified its existence -- and thus fulfilled its vocation -- by reversing and recompensing all the countless silent sufferings and unjust extinctions that provided its past and prologue. To achieve this future is to justify its past. The implication here is that the only way to *fully* escape the iniquity of extinction, in this irrational universe, is for reason to rectify all the past perishings that made us possible.--

I would have to make art whether I wanted to or not, to help rectify past perishings. Since this is taken to be a moral imperative, how strictly would it be enforced? And if it is *the* moral imperative (if it is the deliverance of the conclusion of the meta-morality process), then how can we allow people to rebel against it, by not being wholly adapted to bringing it about? How can we be allowed to see things any other way? Moral realisms always threaten a certain amount of human freedom, but I personally would not want my freedom taken away for the sake of art and games.]

[I used to hang out with Nietzsche fans, and have read a few of his books. The *Übermensch* teaching I found to be kind of odd. Supposedly, once God has died, we create our own values. I've tried to think what that would mean, and would guess that values are simply opinions that X is good, maybe ones that we share with other people. So, to create our own values, we... plug in different things for X? That doesn't sound markedly better than herd morality to me. Or at least, not as revolutionary, or universe-expanding. Maybe not even new at all -- each of us already selects different things to consider good, selections which we don't share with people around us -- perhaps ones which no one else has ever valued before. So we are already *übermenschen*? (Maybe I don't understand Nietzsche on this point.) I think of this when I read transhumanist or posthumanist superlatives about the great things we can engineer for ourselves in the future. Art is basically just art, games are basically just games, sex is basically just sex, the feeling of well-being is basically just the feeling of well-being. You can make it more refined, but not make something really new. Experience with experience leads to diminishing

returns on all experience seeming that amazing. (And if my jaded view means I need to be re-engineered, then we might as well re-engineer people to appreciate the cheapest good-feeling lives possible, and we would have closed off some important meta-moral possibilities by no longer paying attention to whatever in me seemed to need something better than super-art, super-games, and super-sex in order to not be jaded.) I guess my feeling is, why should I invest in Moynihan's cause, running so hard and putting my shoulder to the plow, if the outcome is not that much better than what we have now? It seems nice for people to keep living into the far future, but I'm not that inspired, and lack of political will is what happens when everyone thinks something (that's really important) is nice, but don't find themselves inspired to do anything for its sake.]

[One Nietzsche teaching I took to a lot more was the one about (paraphrase) one moment of true reality and joy making the rest of life, no matter how miserable, worth living. I think for some people, when stressed by terrible experiences, this is tested, and the sources of joy and reality come out even stronger. Life is affirmed even more. But for other people, when the terrible times come, they come to hate stress so much that they only want things to be happy, safe, and fun. And this comes at the risk of them perhaps hating life, or turning away from reality. But I'm not sure I can blame someone for being traumatized by life, thus turning away from it; instead of being challenged by it, thus drawn to trust it. I'm not sure what the proper treatment is for that condition (something favoring both health and strength, both mental and spiritual). But maybe someday I will know better what to prescribe for it.]

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p. 424

--Keeping history going means acknowledging our ability, and thus our duty, to learn from our mistakes. It means acknowledging our obligation to continue and to survive, to avoid the precipice of X-risk, in order to find out where we might be taking ourselves. This remains our duty even when the world of tomorrow appears a progressively worse place; it remains regardless of immediate disillusionment, weariness, or resignation, because, as long as ethical beings are still around, *there is at least potential for the world to become astronomically better*.--

If we keep going in our world-birthing process despite how bad things may seem in the short term ["short term" relatively speaking -- a short term that could consume a whole human lifetime], we may have to suffer and die for what we believe in. Altruism can be bitter. There's the story of the mugger who offers a nonzero chance of giving some arbitrarily astronomical reward to someone in exchange for a measly $100. The mugger could have offered an even higher reward to someone in exchange for them experiencing a lifetime of loneliness, suffering, and madness. A

rational altruist would have to take the offer, in both cases, because they knew if they won (and the expected value would justify this rationally), they would distribute the reward to benefit all living beings. There's a kind of self-giving, to reason and to morality, as we *must* reach for what's best, a kind of excellence here, which is both horrifying and transcendent of all that is cheap. But it seems like altruists (or at least, the ones that would follow Moynihan's basic path) are trying to make a world that can't elicit that anymore. They seem to be trying to end their own kind, by fixing the world.

Labels: #book review, #civilization, #death, #Moloch, #morality, #Slate Star Codex

Book Review Postview: X-Risk by Thomas Moynihan

%book-review-postview-x-risk-by-thomas

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

Now I'm done reviewing *X-Risk* by Thomas Moynihan. Here are some answers to the thoughts I had when I was previewing this process.

> Here are a few things I'm interested in from this book: 1) general intellectual history; 2) the history of existential risk; 3) a chance to meditate on history / civilizational development in general; 3) a chance to meditate on existential risk; 4) engage with Moynihan's "seeing existential risk is a sign that we are mature" idea.

I think I got all of those.

> I don't think I'll try to read it twice, unless it seems like a good idea once I get through it once. It's a history book and not a philosophy book.

I only read it once, as predicted. Actually, I found the philosophy (and futurist) parts of it the most interesting and useful to me, page for page. But that's not unusual, because I am more interested and educated in those subjects than in history. Futurism is somewhere between philosophy and history (a kind of speculative history). So it talks about change and events, but is imaginary, rather than based in pre-existing evidence. The history I found myself reading through as "material". I think that probably the history was where Moynihan was "earning his keep", and so he had to provide more details, ones which perhaps to a historian evaluating Moynihan's story would have seemed necessary, but which were a bit more than necessary to support Moynihan's futurism. That's not a criticism of Moynihan, but a report of my experience.

Perhaps in an ideal universe, I would have found a more philosophy- or futurism-oriented book to work against, rather than a history book with philosophy and futurism in it. Maybe in the future... But if Moynihan did a good job representing the beliefs of a large-enough segment of the intellectual culture (for instance, certain of the transhumanists or other atheistic futurists), then I think his book would have to have been a valuable one for me to read. It may be just as well that I got a version of

transhumanism and longtermism intended for a more-general audience, with history, futurism, and philosophy related to each other in one book.

I recently read *Unbelievers* by Alec Ryrie, and it also struck me as being a history book that was trying to do philosophy (or in Ryrie's case, perhaps some psychology). Both books did some preaching, subtly or not. History is an art form, I guess.

Labels: #book review

Book Review: The Feeling of Value by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette

%book-review-feeling-of-value-by-sharon

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

See also this review's preview and postview.

Review

The Feeling of Value, by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette, is a book proposing a moral realism, in which goodness and badness are instantiated in qualia of goodness and badness, respectively.

Her book is well-written -- maybe better than the average analytic philosophy book. Her topic is one that is important. People aren't always very motivated by reason (perhaps we are something like "reason resistant" or "reason anti-realist" when it departs from pragmatism on a personal level). But young people still expect the world to make sense, and a culture steeped in moral realism might behave more morally per person than the status quo. Certainly there's something about the spirit of realism, moral or otherwise, which is refreshing.

Arguably, we are all doing our best anyway, or it could be that causing everybody to want to do the right thing all at once will produce diminishing returns, so instead, people should just carry on as they are, and cultural change is not called for. I have tended to resist this idea. I think we can motivate at least a significant marginal change in culture through some kind of moral realism. While I ultimately find Rawlette's realism to be incomplete, I appreciate the spirit in which she may have pursued it, assuming that in some way she was hoping to make the world better through philosophy.

If I had no idea of such a thing as transformative AI, I might see a great field for cultural transformation to produce whatever good we're going to have in the world. There may still be something to this, even if there is such a thing as AI that may transform "everything". Maybe transformative AI will take longer to arrive than expected. Maybe it will never arrive, as much as it may seem to be on the way. It may be that AI will not be as transformative as we think. (For instance, its "hands" might be tied by the human political structures that govern them.)

Rawlette doesn't mention this, but one value of moral realism is the ability to say "Here is history-invariant right and wrong, so that civilization has a firm constitution, keeping it from drifting in bad directions." A futurist altruist might try their best to make sure that there is a good future in 2,000 years, or whatever time frame. If it seems that people could voluntarily drift their culture toward anti-natalism, or if humans become increasingly useless and are okay with that, choose uselessness, so that humans no longer need to exist for civilization's purposes (maybe AI decide that is the case), then such an altruist might want to establish a history-invariant constitution for human (or human-AI) culture which preserves human existence, just as they would take any other precaution to ensure that humans don't die out in 2,000 years. Also a good moral realism may help tell us what true human (or animal) well-being really is, which is helpful if the alignment of transformative AI is effectively the constitution of the future. We would want AI to be implementing truly good values, if we could manage to keep it aligned to whatever it is we want it to be aligned to.

I have written in more detail in my notes on *The Feeling of Value* (notes on first pass, notes on second pass). Also, I provide a somewhat incomplete summary of her book at the end of this review, which may help the reader of this review decide whether to read her book.

Here are a few thoughts overall.

I wondered a lot whether Rawlette adequately connected her normative qualia with pain and pleasure. So for her, goodness is instantiated in qualia of "ought-to-be-ness". It is not obvious to me that that is exactly the same as pleasure, as we ordinarily think of the term. Likewise with qualia of "ought-not-to-be-ness" and pain. (I listened to her 2020 interview with Gus Docker and it sounds like she intends "pleasure" to include any feeling that feels to us like it ought to be. So her underlying idea does not need to be connected with the word "pleasure", necessarily.)

Her book relies heavily on phenomenology. While phenomenology is a (relatively) basic element of philosophy, maybe a future edition could explain how phenomenology is supposed to work, insofar as it provides part of the foundation of her argument.

I thought about it a bit and think she has a case for normative qualia themselves being good and bad. But I think that value can be broader than that. So her theory covers a subset of value.

I don't agree that goodness and badness are inherent in those qualia, though, just that it's pretty hard to not see them as always being good and bad, respectively. That which makes them good and bad is not them themselves.

It's interesting reading her book given my readings on effective altruism.

The effective altruists are one of the perhaps few groups of people who try to influence their action in the world with academic philosophy.

Writing a book like this in 2021 (as opposed to 2008, when it was), an author might engage more with futuristic scenarios, be less inclined to say "Weird things aren't going to happen in practice."

Summary

(Headings in *italics* are Rawlette's, from the book.)

Feeling of Value Summary, ch 1 - 3

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Introduction:

Brief overview of the whole book.

Chaper 1:

pp. 7 - 10

People doubt whether moral realism is worth thinking about. Rawlette says she will show how the extra effort of thinking about it helps us to overcome some of our biases and motivate us more.

The realism/anti-realism distinction

pp. 10 - 15

Rawlette gives a definition for realism vs. anti-realism in normative affairs. She discusses constructivism and projectivism as actually being anti-realist. She explains why she prefers "judgment-independence" to "mind-independence" as criterion for realism. (When you experience pain or pleasure, that very experience in your mind grounds right and wrong on her view.)

Arguments that belief in antirealism shouldn't affect our first-order normative judgments

pp. 15 - 18

Rawlette discusses some of the views of anti-realists, which claim that coming to be an anti-realist does not affect what you care about. She asserts that it does, because you lose the sense that you need to conform your moral judgments to what it judgment-independent.

Perspectival bias

pp. 19 - 22

Rawlette discusses perspectival bias ("human beings, as we actually are,

are not equally motivated to attend to the interests of all other human beings"). Then considers realism vs. anti-realism with respect to how their metaethical views ought to affect their perspectival bias.

Motivation to remove perspectival bias

pp. 22 - 25

Rawlette tries to show how judgment-independence itself causes us to work against our perspectival biases. We see that we experience the value of pleasure / disvalue of pain, and think, if that is true for me, it must be true for anyone else's pleasure / pain.

Conclusion

pp. 25 - 26

Summary of Chapter 1

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Chapter 2:

pp. 27 - 28

Brief overview of chapter 2. There are realisms that Rawlette rejects, and her realism is built as a response to their flaws.

pp. 28 - 40 *Intuitionism*

Rawlette criticizes intuitionism, on the grounds that people's moral intuitions can contradict. Therefore what seems self-evident (or in her terms, "self-justifying") can't be trusted in.

pp. 40 - 48 *Minimal realism*

Rawlette rejects minimal realism (the view that metaphysical questions do not apply to ethics because there is nothing "out there" in the world that informs them) because it implies that moral facts have no connection to moral judgments. If we have moral judgments, they are not evidence of moral facts. But if this is so, then we are effectively anti-realists, so this position is not effectively a form of realism.

pp. 48 - 58 *Ideal-observer theory*

Rawlette rejects ideal-observer theories, which say that a person can find judgment-independent moral truth by imagining their idealized, more or less omniscient self's desires, because these theories depend on desires, which can be arbitrary and contingent, and are thus really anti-realisms.

pp. 58 - 63 *Synthetic naturalism*

Rawlette rejects synthetic naturalism as a route to moral realism because it

does not offer an account of what goodness is. Synthetic naturalism says that certain physical properties are the same as what is good, perhaps ones which causally regulate our saying "good" in a homeostatic way. (I don't fully understand this section, but this is my understanding.) Unfortunately, there are different ways that we could have evolved to say "good", perhaps due to being on different planets or in different cultures. So we aren't talking about the same thing when we say 'good', talking to someone from a different background. So this can't be the foundation of judgment-independent moral realism. We haven't figured out what "good" means in a way that justifies it against some kind of disagreement.

(I think I would understand this section better if I knew what was meant by "causal regulation". A quick search didn't reveal a definition, and I didn't feel like digging to find one.)

pp. 64 - 66 *Criteria for a plausible realism*

Rawlette gives four criteria for a plausible realism:

1) "An account of our concept of goodness". It may have to be a circular definition, in the end, or a description rather than a definition. Have some idea of what this "goodness" idea is.

2) "An explanation of the way in which things in the world objectively satisfy our concept of goodness." There has to be some connection with the way things are (as far as we can perceive them) and our judgment that they are good.

3) "An explanation of the way in which we can come to *know* which things objectively satisfy our concept of goodness." We have to be able to know the reasons why we connect "good" to a thing or state of affairs.

4) "An explanation of why we are often mistaken about what is good." Given that we have some way to say "this is good", or for any thing, "this is good", and have reason to know it, why do people disagree on moral matters? Why is our view both true and not obvious, or not universally adopted?

Rawlette points out that the attempted realisms given earlier in the chapter do not pass her test, then mentions analytic descriptivism as a promising candidate, to consider in the next chapter.

Ch. 3

pp. 69 - 71

Rawlette introduces the subsequent chapter. Her argument will connect the feeling of goodness or badness to good and bad. In this way, there is something outside human judgment -- but still accessible to the human mind -- which can be the foundation of valuing and disvaluing.

pp. 72 - 75 *What are normative qualia?*

Normative qualia are the very qualia of goodness or badness, in their purest, most basic form. Rawlette wants to claim that the feeling of goodness is goodness itself, and the feeling of badness is badness itself.

pp. 75 - 79 *The experience of pain*

Pain can be split into nociception and the feeling of badness. This feeling is not a judgment, but rather the perception of a quale of badness.

p. 79 - 86 *Phenomenology or behavioral disposition?*

Rawlette considers whether pain is simply nociception married to a disposition of aversion, apart from any phenomenology of badness, and says no, because we have empirical reasons to think that aversive behaviors and thoughts, and phenomenology, are not always connected. She points out that for some reason, aversive and attractive phenomenology affect decision-making, and so probably have an essential connection to reality, in themselves. We consider ourselves to have ethical responsibilities toward animals if we believe they feel pain, rather than merely exhibit aversive behavior.

pp. 87 - 94

The qualia of goodness and badness can be found in pleasures of all sorts, and pains of all sorts, in all pleasant and unpleasant experiences, as diverse as they may be (Rawlette quotes someone contrasting the pleasures of "a rock-and-roll band, or the taste of a great wine" (p. 92)). They are each one quale, or each a dimension of qualia (Rawlette doesn't think the distinction matters for her argument), distinct from whatever qualia make up an individual pleasant or unpleasant thing.

pp. 95 - 100 *Objective normativity and non-intentionality*

Rawlette points out that normativity does not have to be intentional, that it can apply directly to the normative qualia themselves, and not have to apply to the objects that occasion the normative qualia.

pp. 100 - 101 *Conclusion*

Summary of the chapter.

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Ch. 4 intro pp. 103 - 106

Rawlette introduces the chapter, saying that she wants to come up with descriptive content for her normativity.

pp. 106 - 117 *The Open Question Argument*

The Open Question Argument (of Moore) says that if you say "What is good is what is pleasant" then if you ask "is pleasure good?" it's like asking "Are pleasant things pleasant?" But asking "is pleasure good?" makes sense. So then, what is good? Rawlette thinks that the way out of this is to say that goodness itself is a quale -- locate it in something outside the world of human judgment. Then she considers and rejects objections to this thought, particularly those against pleasure being intrinsically good, or pain intrinsically bad.

pp. 117 - 124 *The advantages of analytic descriptivism*

Rawlette evaluates her analytic descriptivism by the four criteria for a robust realism given in Chapter 2. She thinks that it passes the tests.

Ch. 5

pp. 125 - 127 intro

Rawlette wants to go from pro tanto goodness / badness to goodness / badness all-things-considered. She thinks that the way to do this is to add up the value from each quale of goodness occasioned by an action and then subtract the value from each quale of badness.

pp. 127 - 139 *Are others' qualia normative for me?*

Rawlette says that others' qualia are normative for one, because they "present as having agent-neutral value" and "they do not contain any reference to any particular action or agent."

pp. 128 - 131 (subsection) *1. Positive arguments*

Rawlette says that when we experience pain, we do not think it is only for us to avoid it, that gives no one else a reason to help us. Similarly with pleasure. She claims that normative qualia are "ought-to-be-ness" or "ought-not-to-be-ness" and do not prescribe in themselves a way to alleviate or promote them, nor on whom it is incumbent to act to alleviate or promote them.

pp. 131 - 134 (subsection) *2. Objections*

Rawlette considers and rejects reasons internalism as an objection to her theory.

pp. 134 - 139

Rawlette uses Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* to support an argument that says that subjects do not really exist, at least not absolutely enough to say that a quale could only be what it is for one subject.

p. 139 (subsection) *4. Conclusion*

Rawlette gives a practical reason for ignoring most normative qualia (we

are more effective in doing the good that we can if we do so).

pp. 140 - 142 *Are goodness and badness additive?*

Rawlette says normative qualia are additive because they are concrete, and thus add up like other concrete things.

pp. 142 - 143 (subsection) *1. Parfit's alternative proposal*

Rawlette discusses Derek Parfit's rejection of the Impersonal Total Principle ("If other things are equal, the best outcome is the one in which there would be the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living.")

pp. 143 - 145 (subsection) *2. Against Parfit's proposal*

Rawlette discusses "intrinsic good", highlighting its difference from instrumental and extrinsic good. Also from goods whose value depend on the existence of a separate moral fact.

She claims that purely intrinsic goods can't have diminishing marginal utility because there would have to be some higher good that could measure them as diminishing. (My understanding: So if something is of diminishing marginal value, we normally say it's worth less relative to something else. If there were only one good thing to be maximized, there could be only one kind of marginal value, one to one with each unit of "good thing" added.)

pp. 145 - 149 (subsection) *3. Objections to additivity*

Rawlette considers and rejects the possibility of there really being multiple intrinsic values (anything in addition to normative qualia).

She considers and rejects Parfit's claim that happiness can be of diminishing marginal value to a world but not to an individual.

pp. 149 - 153 (subsection) *5. [sic] Concluding argument*

Rawlette claims that it is the intrinsic qualitative nature of normative qualia which give a reason to act. Therefore we can't prefer average utilitarianism (we would claim that each unit of happiness in the "Repugnant" world is worth less than in the "nice" world), nor can we endorse concerns of equality that contradict total utilitarianism. She considers and rejects the possibility of the Repugnant Conclusion being something we could practically implement. She claims that we find "Repugnant" worlds distasteful because we feel sympathy for the individuals who would live in them, but this does not affect the math adding up normative qualia to form an overall quantity of good or bad.

pp. 153 - 158 *Practical questions*

Rawlette offers some solutions to problems in measuring and comparing

normative qualia.

pp. 158 - 159 *Conclusion*

Rawlette summarizes the chapter.

pp. 163 - 165 *Introduction to Part III*

Rawlette introduces chapters 6 and 7.

Ch. 6

pp. 167 - 171 intro

Chapter six is introduced. Rawlette will attempt to show that hedonic utilitarianism is not in conflict with our moral intuition, in the cases that we actually confront (as opposed to hypothetical ones used in thought experiments).

pp. 171 - 173 *Act utilitarianism versus rule utilitarianism*

Rawlette affirms act utilitarianism and rejects rule utilitarianism.

pp. 173 - 176 *Preliminaries about the utility-maximizing decision procedure*

Rawlette considers what she calls "Straightforward Utilitarian Decision Procedure" (know everything, add up all possible consequences to all possible actions, choose the utility-maximizing one) and says that this is impractical, but that there can be other decision procedures which are simpler and which do maximize utility, which recommend exactly what the Straightforward UDP would.

pp. 176 - 178 *First general feature of actual situations: Uncertainty*

Because we don't have perfect information, we have to guess what is the best way to go, based on previous experience. Rawlette cites Gerd Gigerenzer's *Gut Feelings: the Intelligence of the Unconscious* as a source of a decision procedure that does not require having a lot of evidence / past experience (consider one relevant variable for which you have a lot of data, because adding variables shrinks your sample size, making you more vulnerable to random effects).

pp. 178 - 184 *Second general feature of actual situations: Need for coordination*

Promises are a good way to help coordinate behavior. But Straightforward UDP does not allow promises to be formed. Rawlette offers a modification of Straightforward UDP which does allow promises to be kept (in cases where you're unsure if keeping a promise is utilitous, err on the side of keeping it). Deviating from Straightforward UDP can further utility (can fulfill Straightforward UDP's goal).

pp. 184 - 189 *Third general feature of actual situations: Motivational limitations*

People tend to find it hard to motivate themselves to increase utility unless they (or those they care about) can reap the benefits of their work toward it. So it's best to let people have some kind of property (literal or figurative) which is protected from interference from others (thus, "rights"). People will tend to let their selfish bias override the more utilitous, other-favoring decisions, unless they have principles ingrained into them beforehand, of how to act in certain circumstances. What this (and the previous two sections) suggest is that we have rules and rights which we only violate (according to the dictates of something like Straightforward UDP) in exceptional circumstances -- which Rawlette points out is the way ordinary morality seems to work.

pp. 189 - 194 *Applying this decision procedure to Transplant cases*

Rawlette considers thought experiments in which it is supposed beneficial to sacrifice one healthy person to be able to transplant their organs in multiple people in need of a transplant, and finds it not recommended by her decision procedure.

pp. 195 - 197 *The probability of destroying useful expectations*

Rawlette continues her discussion of Transplant cases, specifically whether knowledge of one disturbing transplant can significantly damage people's expectations.

pp. 197 - 200 *Conclusion*

Rawlette discusses other anti-utilitarian thought experiments besides Transplant cases, still concluding that utilitarianism is viable, for reasons given earlier in the chapter.

Ch. 7

pp. 201 - 204 intro

Rawlette discusses the fact that there is a history of discussing and also rejecting hedonism, and identifies Robert Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment as the prime obstacle to people accepting hedonism.

pp. 204 - 208 *Pleasure and pain as indicators*

Pleasure and pain are indicators of reality. In the long run, we experience more pleasure and less pain if we respond to reality.

pp. 208 - 213 *Why the experience machine is a bad idea*

Rawlette gives hedonistic reasons to reject the Experience Machine. It is impractical and dangerous to cut yourself off from reality. If it is safe, we

would have to have very good computers take care of us.

Also, if we found ourselves in a 100% safe world for using the Machine, there would be no point to being in touch with reality, so we would be so bored we might as well use it.

pp. 214 - 216 *Our valuing something vs. its having objective value*

Rawlette argues that perceptions of value or disvalue, as applied to objects, are not as reliable as the perception that the normative qualia themselves (as perceptions) are valuable or disvaluable.

pp. 216 - 220 *Why taking something to be intrinsically valuable could be instrumentally valuable*

Rawlette gives reasons why it could be useful from a hedonistic point of view to see things as having intrinsic value.

Feeling of Value, Ch. 7 con't

pp. 220 - 224 *Human pleasure vs. animal pleasure*

Rawlette claims that her view elevates the status of animals (because their pleasure is no better or worse than ours), but gives practical reasons why a human life might be instrumentally more valuable than a given animal's life.

p. 224 *Conclusion*

Summary of the chapter.

Conclusion

p. 225

Quick wrap-up of the whole book.

Labels: #book review, #metaethics, #motivation, #psychology

Book Review Postview: The Feeling of Value by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette

%book-review-postview-feeling-of-value

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

What was it like having read and reviewed *The Feeling of Value* by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette?

I think it was worth it to read it twice, although the second reading was somewhat difficult -- hard for me to pay attention to the pages that I had already read. I read the first time through in October and the second time through in November (of 2020) and approaching the passes a month apart was fairly close. So with Berkeley, maybe it is good that I take a break before the second pass.

I have found that reading a book is a way to spend time in the neighborhood of a subject, and that may be value enough to re-reading. I may have had (maybe a reader can detect) cases where I picked up on something in the book in the second pass that I missed in the first.

With this book, the first that I tried to review more rigorously (with a method reminiscent of pre-registration), I wrote many things down in the preview, something that I have not kept up with all the other previews. Perhaps I had more axes to grind with Rawlette's material before I started (although *X-Risk* ought to have occasioned just as many metaphorical axes from me. It might just be the like how at the beginning of a foot race, people tend to run fast before they settle in for the long haul.

Here are some quotes from the preview, with follow-ups to the preview in italics. The preview was fairly long, so I may not comment or comment at length about everything.

I hope to compare Rawlette's approach to that of MSLN, especially legitimism and simantism. She may show me ways to make those accounts more specific/explicit/developed. I expect to be critical of her approach to ethics."

I don't remember if simantism came up a lot (an observant reader might see it), but certainly legitimism did. The prediction of being critical of her approach to ethics was borne out.

Here are some criticisms I have of hedonic utilitarianism which she may address:

1. How do we know what ought to give us pain or pleasure?

    a. This is relevant when thinking about artificial superintelligence (ASI). An ASI programmed to be a hedonist might want to change human nature so that it is trivially easy to cause us pleasure, and to avoid giving us pain. We would say "No, I don't want to be a blob of pleasure", but why not be one?

    There's some risk (similar or essentially the same as what a past version of me said here) that we find pleasure easy to consent to, and the removal of pain, so there's an incentive for civilization (including ASI) to drift in the direction of giving us more and more pleasure, less and less pain, until we have gradually simplified ourselves into blobs of pleasure. I think hedonism is not just an explicit philosophical position, but also a powerful psychological tendency.

    Some people might bite the bullet and say "No, being a blob of pleasure sounds good to me". Who can say what's wrong or right? If it feels good, it's good. But what if God disagrees? You might look at your child and hope that they don't get hooked on heroin. Technically, they're happy when they're on heroin. Maybe technically we're happy when we're living painless, rich, godless lives, or when we are blobs of pleasure. But God might disagree.

    I still find this kind of thinking compelling after having read the book.

    b. Another point of relevance is when people construct scripts of what a life is supposed to be. When a life event is "bad" then "you are in a pity-worthy, deplorable state" -- the script wants you to feel depressed. Should you feel depressed? Maybe the script comes from other people, and is

there to discourage you from doing things that are unpopular.

I don't remember this point coming up in the review. I think Rawlette might say "Well, we should just make it so that people aren't depressed, however that works out."

2. What about other goods that aren't captured well by hedonism?

a. Pleasure could be bad, if it takes us away from God, or some other reality. In an upcoming short story about the future of beauty, that I plan to release relatively soon, you may see a tension between deeper good and surface good. It may take some pain to have deeper good, and unbroken pleasure may prevent things like coming to value people apart from how they or their life realities give a person pleasure.

I was referring to "The Future of Beauty". Rawlette did address the contrast between kinds of pleasure (or, more accurately than "pleasure" in her view, positive experience), and if I recall correctly, rejected the distinction, going for flat quantity of positive qualia. So maybe she would simply not see the problem.

b. Pain could be good. Two more easily dismissed examples of this are found in the concept of purgatory (pain, in itself, purges us of sin or the guilt of sin) and the phrase "pain is weakness leaving the body". (Dismissed because you could say "what you really want is improved strength, or heaven, in the end, and both those states are basically pleasurable.") A less easily dismissed example is found when we ask "what if God doesn't care if we suffer, as long as we can bear it and connect with reality?" In other words, what if there is pain in heaven after all -- our real reward is God himself, not the pleasure or freedom from pain he might be able to give us?

The pain is good because it is real, and experiencing it is part of being receptive to reality. An overall receptiveness to reality (perhaps) is the only way to really connect with God.

This is an interesting angle that I had forgotten about in the six months since I wrote the preview. I don't think this made it into the review. I'm not sure what I think about it anymore. It still basically sounds right to me, but not an idea that seems as compelling as it used to.

c. I am adding this section in later in the editing process, and don't want to make this point long so that it gives me yet more to edit, but basically I can mention fiducialism as a replacement for hedonism.

This makes about as much sense as before. I do find Rawlette's version of hedonism (qualia of ought-to-be-ness maximizing) and hedonism in general to be more plausible to me than when I began, but I still think fiducialism is better.

3. Why should we think that "ought" has anything to do with our feelings, or even our judgments?

a. Maybe "ought" is more like "I want something to be a certain way (if it's not that way), or that want is satisfied by that thing being that certain way (if it is), and that exact wanting is something that deserves to be true". (I suspect that it's hard to define "deserves" without basically using "ought" -- circularity. Maybe "ought" is a primitive of language and psychology?) Someone who ought to be able to define things is the one who can define things, and can say "pain is not necessarily bad, and pleasure is not necessarily good". The athlete who says "pain is weakness leaving the body", or the believer who says "I will accept this bitter cup" are basically exercising their ability to claim

that some thing ought to be. To say that something that is, ought to be, is something that in a sense no one can argue with. But maybe some persons can even say that what is ought not to be? So in this way, good and bad come out of our taste, more so than out of our pure experience. (Out of opinion rather than feeling.) Maybe pain biases us to call it bad. But we don't have to -- we can see through that sometimes.

These topics came up in the review.

b. It could be that it seems like hedonism is a real view of things, that pleasure ought to be and pain ought not to be, because these are popular judgments. (One way to cash out the popular defining of human well-being.) (You could also say that this is why preferentialism seems to be a real view, because of course everyone likes preferences.) These might seem to be real things, because of our humanism. But why should real "ought" have anything to do with human judgments? You could say that human judgments do have something to do with it, if what we're exploring is "our strongest moral convictions" rather than something outside that. (Rawlette, p. 3: "The version of realism I present actually provides a robust metaethical justification for many of our strongest moral convictions."). But what do our strongest moral convictions have to do with real "ought"? If there is a God (in this case, in the sense of a most-authoritative being), then we might hope to be in line with his preferences, or perhaps rather with his *truth*, which is similar to preference but which is unlike ours for some kind of lack of "falsehood" (we call both self-justifiying explanations and lies "B.S.") or lack of partiality. If there is no God, then how are "our strongest moral convictions" anything other than "what is popular in a certain way"? (I mean this both as a rhetorical and a real question, if that makes sense.) And then I'm not sure that Rawlette's project is really realist after all. Her ultimate criterion is (may be? not sure

yet) "our strongest moral convictions", not any objective truth. In other words, realism is supposedly about some grounding in reality through an argument of justification, while antirealism doesn't bother with that. "Our strongest moral convictions" sounds like the same criterion moral antirealists would use. Why not just observe the criterion, rather than adding some conceptual layer, some kind of logical justification? Unless, what we are doing (with both realist and antirealist ethics) is bending the criterion, democratically, by presenting an argument that sounds (and in a sense, is) logical, and is thus persuasive in shifting "our strongest moral convictions"? If you want to change other people's values to be like yours, you use logic, even if the real foundation of values is just values -- we can be dazzled by logic.

Or maybe she really could be a moral realist (the appeal to strongest moral convictions doesn't rule that out), one who just says "our strongest moral convictions are real and we should act on them", as opposed to the antirealist, who says "our strongest moral convictions are fictions and we should act on them". (I think I do not yet understand moral realism vs. antirealism, especially moral antirealism, and hope the book will help me understand.) Can you act on something as much as you should if you don't feel it is real? Maybe that's the essence of Rawlette's project, to say "No, so since we know we ought to act on certain things, we need to figure out a way to see them as real". I know that there is a kind of quixotic task that philosophers take up (and scientists, I think), which is the search for truth but which is actually really wanting something to be true and figuring out a way to find out that it is true (if possible). If it's true that we just know that certain things are good, and we have to change our perspective on reality so as to fully pursue those goods, then maybe reality is most deeply known not by whatever science or philosophy says, but in those

things we know we have to think are good, and have to pursue as good. We want things to be true, but in a way, that could be that they just are true.

Or maybe Rawlette would be willing to say "No, those deep things aren't true since they don't line up with philosophy" -- philosophy is the real authority after all -- but doesn't happen to have to say that because of the book she wrote, showing how they do line up.

(If "our strongest moral convictions" can be modified with rhetorical or logical force, then does it become "what is right is what psychologically strong, motivated people reprogram people to see as right"? -- something that the coming powers of AI and genetic engineering can intensify. So then such convictions might not be some kind of immutable standard.)

One could say that the deep things, and hedonic utilitarianism, are two different aspects of the same being, the latter being the former's expression in the world of ethical philosophy. That doesn't feel intuitively correct to me, though. I could see maybe fiducial utilitarianism getting closer to that function than hedonic utilitarianism, but even that doesn't feel right. Maybe because ethical philosophy itself is a such a strange shard.

Still, we are left with "should it be true that deep human convictions are reliable judges or creators of 'ought'?" -- a philosophical question. And philosophy, as a whole, the general pursuit, has some grounding in deep human convictions, comes from the outworking of them. We might wonder if philosophy suggests that we should consider God's point of view, either that God shares our convictions, or that his differ from ours and that we should align ourselves with his

-- in other words, it's ultimately his convictions as the founder of reality (or as most-authoritative for some other reason than founding things) that are truth, while ours are feelings or opinions.

That's a nice essay that I had forgotten about. I'm not sure at this moment that "deepest moral convictions" really do cash out to "what the majority of people think (really or officially)". But I guess it seems true -- I would want to think about it more before endorsing it. I am still not sure what moral anti-realism really is. I thought I understood from Rawlette, and thought that it was something very much like "humans get to make up what is moral" (I could be wrong, but I think that's more or less what "judgment-dependence" would be). But Gloor's anti-realism doesn't sound exactly like that, and Gloor's sounds like a more competitive belief system in the marketplace of ideas. There's something slippery about it, though, which prevents me from grasping or trusting it, at least for the time being.

c. I mentioned "truth" in the previous section. We might say that truth is inherently something that is indifferent to popularity. In fact, Rawlette's project is to use truth to change people's minds (fellow philosophers who are moral antirealists, for instance). So why shouldn't "ought" be indifferent to popularity as well? Ought could be a form of truth.

d. Some of the above might boil down to: "we want truth, independent of popularity -- does it come from God, or from qualia?" I would want to defend "God", and Rawlette "qualia" or something in the neighborhood of "qualia". I would say "if ought is -- and I think it has to be -- then it is an opinion", while Rawlette might say "if ought is, then it is a feeling" -- not "we know it through feelings", because then what is it in itself if not an opinion? (Mostly not a rhetorical question.)

If you're looking for a way to criticize my own

project, then you may find something fruitful here.

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One thing I am thinking of addressing in the review (maybe more than I am about to here), is the question of "What does this matter?" Certainly the truth matters in itself. But how much money can we devote to understanding the truth? Is there a way that an altruist could benefit from a book like Rawlette's?

As an (amateur) philosopher myself, I share the dilemma of Rawlette (as I currently guess it to be, not having yet read her book). I want to get some truth that makes a difference in the world. But the expression of that truth, in the way I know how to express it, is only going to be heard by philosophically-inclined people -- maybe not a lot of them, only some of whom will change what they do as a result. A project like Rawlette's (which, I see from p. 1, involves the term "motivational structure", a term I also use) might hope to get people to feel and thus behave differently -- maybe causing a release of cultural energy to cause more work or more deeply felt caring (or the metaphor might be one of putting people to work to build up cultural structures and institutions of caring). But are philosophers or the philosophically-inclined the right people to try to motivate to care more and work harder? Or is it better to speak to people in general, there being so many more of them?

Francis Schaeffer was disheartened at how philosophy trickled down to the masses. But to me it seems like philosophy may not have much potential to undo the undermining of moral realism (part of what Schaeffer lamented) through the same process. That is, it doesn't seem as clear to me that philosophy trickles down to the average person, the way it used to in Schaeffer's day. I hope to be proved (or help prove myself) wrong some day, in some way, but it seems to me that the default assumption is that philosophy is a game for philosophers, and few others pay attention. Schaeffer thought that the artists could communicate philosophy-derived truths, but it seems to me that most artists are either roughly as obscure as philosophers, or not concerned with philosophy themselves. And what can art do that is fresh? Where are the new philosophies that are different from all the old ones that have already influenced art? Again, I can hope that somehow I could find or create ideas or approaches to things that are fresh, in some way, which inspire artists (or myself) to create philosophically-informed art. But my default assumption remains that philosophy doesn't affect the average person, that there isn't a trickling-down through art into the average person's culture.

(Maybe a counterpoint is: nihilism as evinced in recent TV.)

For those of you who have not read Francis Schaeffer, he was dismayed by how secular thought patterns trickled down to the average person in his day,

undermining Christianity and what I could call "realism" (as opposed to anti-realism).

While I might hope to someday, somehow, reach average people with philosophically-derived ideas or spirits, I can see right now a group of people who take philosophy seriously, and perhaps would take Rawlette's philosophy seriously, who put philosophy into action, or at least generally aspire to. These are the effective altruists (EAs). Would effective altruists be the kind of people who need to be motivated to work harder and care more? Maybe some of them? There's a term they use: "value drift", the way that a person's priorities change and they no longer work as hard for the cause, save as much money to give, etc. Could something like Rawlette's philosophy, a bolsterer of motivational structure, be something that could prevent value drift in some individuals? It sounds plausible. The effective altruists are already aware of the possibility of being moral realists. (Many of them already are.) Maybe her book would cause some of those who are moral antirealists to become moral realists, causing them to stick with their first love.

Would it be possible to cause people on the margins of effective altruist ideology to shift into being effective altruists, or EA-aligned? For instance, a moral antirealist might think "Yeah, giving money to help people is good... I should do that... but, then, morality is kind of a social construct, right? Yeah, whatever." and not do it. This person being driven by self-interest and logic, if they had better beliefs, they might say "Giving money to help people is good... and what is good really is good... I should do that..." and do it. A very self-interested person might shy away from accepting what Rawlette said in the first place, or use some kind of self-deception in order to both hold Rawlette's views and not act on them. They would not be on the margin of EA-aligned behavior. But there might be a lot of people who are on the margin, who can be philosophically literate, or are as much as EAs are, who just haven't heard of Rawlette's argument. They might even have heard the EAs' pitch (Singer's Drowning Child Argument, perhaps), and yet vitiated it with moral antirealism. But an effective argument for moral realism might make a difference. One would think that EAs would be looking for new ideologies to prevent value drift and aid in recruiting people from social spaces adjacent to them. From a few months' reading of the EA Forum, I don't get the impression that this is something they seriously pursue to a great extent. (I might be wrong -- but something that was a particularly burning issue, I wouldn't have missed.) This might be because they know better than to be into ideology (it's something they're past, as individuals, and something they don't expect enough people to really be changed by), or it might be that many EAs are not really into human resource questions, and this is essentially a human resource question -- or some other reason.

I remember a philosophy professor saying something like "people aren't

bad, it's just that the system is bad". So maybe Rawlette can't do much good, since everyone is already moral and good, and we're just in horribly ill-coordinated systems. I hope to discuss this in the future at some point, show a way that if you really care, you can do something about systemic problems, so as to provide benefit from improved motivational structures. (This already has some other ideas that might apply.) I have (and I think Rawlette may possibly also have) the sense that it is required of us to do what is best, not just a socially-acceptable half-effort. It is wrong of us to not be heroes or "anointed ones", at whatever scale we can and should be. Perhaps that is a message which could resonate with the average person. In other words, with the right support beliefs and ideas, Rawlette's may be able to function as one might intend them to.

One thing I don't know from not having read Rawlette's book yet is how possible it is to convert her book into a form which can be adopted by people who don't read academic philosophy.

That was a nice note which I had mostly forgotten about. I do think that the cause area of moral realism is underrated. I think it is unpopular, for reasons I have not fully figured out. I think if people wanted to hear it, people would have figured out a way for them to hear it. Something like "Just don't have perspectival bias!". Preaching would be enough, without the need for philosophy. But my pessimism may be at least sometimes inaccurate, and motivating even a few people might have high impact, depending on what they go on to do.

Labels: #book review, #metaethics, #motivation

Book Review Notes: The Feeling of Value, pass 1

%feeling-value-notes-pass1

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

See also the main review for The Feeling of Value.

> Here are the notes on my first pass reading *The Feeling of Value*. I have added comments in blockquotes. Quotes of Rawlette in my notes are set off by --'s.

Feeling of Value notes, pp. 1 - 145

> These were written in two files.

Chapter 1

pp. 15 - 16

The high school boy (Hare's example) is told that you can still care about things that have no intrinsic meaning/"mattering". Basically, you can say with your body, subconscious, self, you can trust as though, things matter. But verbally, they don't. Is reality something that is found in words, or do words describe reality, point to it? If the latter, then what Hare and the high school boy do by "having concern for what doesn't matter" is actually relating to things that do matter, and they're only speaking as though they don't. And the things that do matter raise the question "why do these things matter? What is mattering?" which they may or may not recognize, either verbally or really. If they spoke in accordance with what they lived, then it might open up the lived experience of wonder, fear, curiosity, obligation, toward finding out why things matter, whether they matter independent of each observer, and if so, how that would work.

16 - 18

If the validity of values is judged from the perspective of your own values, and nothing else, then is it ever meaningful to say that you should change them? If not, then is it ever valid to try to change other people's values? Maybe there's some range in which people's values can be changed more in line with themselves (I desire to be a better chef, which requires me to value being careful, which I didn't before). So the whole valueset can be furthered. But it seems like people want to change other people's values --

are we sure that such people always change other people's values in ways that are actually in line with those other people's deepest values?

Changing people's values can be depicted, in an extreme way, by the Ministry of Love in *1984*, which beats people to the point that they love what they used to hate (and which the reader will tend to feel was evil). Milder "ministries of love" might involve shaming, isolating, and humiliation rather than physical abuse. These measures are needed, perhaps, because people are not being changed in line with their existing values. And they are justified, if they are, because the values being inculcated are better than the ones they have. But who's to say that one person's values are better than another's? If they're not *really* better than another's, then isn't value changing just a power-play, and isn't morality contingent on who has the power to force other people to change their minds?

Perhaps this does not concern people as much as it could because they spend most of their time around people like them, who reinforce their values. So they feel like they're safe, nobody will come after them to force them to change their values arbitrarily. Or, it does not concern most people as much as it could because most people are part of the mainstream, and being in the value-majority, they take their security for granted. And they take their own values for granted.

A test: how do you behave when you're in power? When your views are popular?

pp. 19 - 22

The previous section (ministries of love, justification for changing other's values) connects to Rawlette's perspectival bias discussion. Perspectival bias can be seen as something which ought to change about people's values.

-- Sidebar: "Disvalue found in inability to will or act, painful or not. Likewise in confusion, painful or not." --

p. 24

Rawlette argues that if I see my own pleasure as having value, I will believe that since other people's pleasure is like my own, it also has value. It's possible to seek your own pleasure and enjoy it without valuing it. Buber (in *Good and Evil*) somewhat neatly redefines and boils down evil to "indecision" and good to "deciding with your whole soul". So with a similar style, one could say "evil is to hunger for what you do not value" or to "not value what you hunger for". Now we wonder "are hungers automatically to be regarded as indicating value?" We could ask "which world is real, the one of hungers, or the one of Forms, or of God (or something else in that vein)?" "Reality" in this case meaning "the one in which real value can be

found, the one whose apparent features can be trusted enough such that a hunger there calls for the valuing of the thing hungered for.

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p. 25

Rawlette contrasts the situation of the "dogmatic" realist and that of the realist who reflects on reasons for whether their motivations reflect judgment-independent value. The dogmatic person, who accepts the strength of their motivations, or the authority of a third party, may be even more perspectivally biased due to their realism.

It's costly to think reflectively about your biases -- a cost which may or may not be affordable. Also, it's possible that intuition grants us true knowledge, in addition to reason. This might appear in our motivations.

It's possible that the process of evaluating evidence for our own compliance with judgment-independent value is flawed (maybe we have bad information, like perhaps we think that this world is real when it's not), and we are better off relying on some kind of third party, or our own motivations.

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pp. 25 - 26

If we attend to our own feelings, and are forced to see them as having value, and are then forced to see all people's feelings as having value, we lose freedom. On some level we still have discretion, but on a deeper, simpler/broader level, we don't. Freedom on that deeper, simpler/broader level is a good in itself. The danger of some kind of "totality"?

> I got the word "totality" from Levinas, but I use it "in ignorance of him". I think the word I use has some connection to his use in *Totality and Infinity*. It may also connect to Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. (I finished but did not read *Totality and Infinity* very successfully, and only began *One-Dimensional Man*, but I have a sense that these are two fruitful connections to explore.) I would say for me, "totality" can mean "everyone conforms to the same unbroken thought pattern and culture, and everyone is made to conform" -- very dangerous if this is not sufficiently good, and dangerous to the individual who lives for a different, perhaps more correct, good. Ethics (the call of the Other?) can turn into totality. Whether Levinas falls into that trap, I can't say, but if he doesn't, he may provide some needed nuance to supplement Rawlette.

Rawlette mentions that "all of us at least have reason to want others to treat *our* interests as equal to theirs". But some people don't, are willing to subordinate their interests to others. Is Rawlette saying they "ought" to demand equality? If so, then what grounds this "ought"?

----- Sidebar: Addicted to rationality --> a slave to rationality --> addicted/slave to morality. Rationality and morality are psychological tendencies that have "gravity", like lust or hate (or a kind of love). They are impersonal. But God is a person, who is related to through "grace". You can love God and God can be your father, rather than your slave-master.

> "Gravity" and "grace" taken fairly faithfully from Simone Weil.

It's possible to relate to morality (be the friend of it, want what it wants and thus behave according to its pattern -- maybe relate to it "Spiritually"<as in "Spiritual Reality">). But if you don't already want what morality wants, why would you start, unless it was out of compulsion?

> "Spiritual Reality" from this blog post.

What kind of compulsion is legitimate? We are compelled by physical hungers (sometimes with unfortunate results).

If you relate to morality, is it then possible to be called to it more deeply in a way that morality is not a slave-master?

A father's authority is different than a tyrant's or a law code's.

Chapter 2

pp. 28 - 33

Is it possible to completely escape intuitionism? In other words, Rawlette wants us to be able to use reason to sort through moral questions. *Should* we? Isn't that an intuition? Yudkowsky may be grounding his belief-set on "what doesn't get us physically killed". Those who don't die exist to judge things morally. But *should* they? Or is there an intuition in that case as well?

> I would guess that characterizing Yudkowsky's epistemology as "believing what doesn't get us physically killed" is at least somewhat simplistic, but here's the passage (from his "The Simple Truth") that I was thinking of:
>
> Inspector Darwin looks at the two arguers, both

apparently unwilling to give up their positions. "Listen," Darwin says, more kindly now, "I have a simple notion for resolving your dispute. You say," says Darwin, pointing to Mark, "that people's beliefs alter their personal realities. And you fervently believe," his finger swivels to point at Autrey, "that Mark's beliefs can't alter reality. So let Mark believe really hard that he can fly, and then step off a cliff. Mark shall see himself fly away like a bird, and Autrey shall see him plummet down and go splat, and you shall both be happy."

We all pause, considering this.

"It sounds reasonable . . ." Mark says finally.

"There's a cliff right there," observes Inspector Darwin.

Autrey is wearing a look of intense concentration. Finally he shouts: "Wait! If that were true, we would all have long since departed into our own private universes, in which case the other people here are only figments of your imagination -- there's no point in trying to prove anything to us--"

A long dwindling scream comes from the nearby cliff, followed by a dull and lonely splat. Inspector Darwin flips his clipboard to the page that shows the current gene pool and pencils in a slightly lower frequency for Mark's alleles.

--

One thing to worry about: how can there be real morality if people disagree on what is moral?

--

p. 34

"no justificatory work" -- but maybe self-evidence could be doing partial justificatory work? An election depends on the weighing of multiple

opinions, but each opinion is at least a little valid in itself.

--

A way to get rid of defeaters to my moral intuitions: kill everyone else -- no more opinions left standing. However, I might argue with myself.

Maybe killing all other people is highly unlikely. But withdrawing, on some level, from everyone else (living, on a deeper level, as though no one else exists), seems to be common.

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p. 43

Mention is made that realism in math and non-moral philosophy is difficult to establish for analogous reasons to moral realism. Does this mean that there might be some analogous argument to Rawlette's "feeling of value" to apply to those domains?

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p. 46

An explanation of why ethics might care about moral facts (why the existence of ethics would call for caring about moral facts) is that ethics says "X is valuable". In one ethical view, X = Y, in another, X = Z. If Y and Z conflict, then we might want to know which is more valuable, which means we have to judge between ethical views.

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p. 54

----- Sidebar: A question to ask of ethicists (e.g. Rawlette): is there such a thing as judgment-independent facts about morality? Is it possible that there is not, though it would be desirable to us that there are? Would we think that there was such a thing as judgment-independent moral facts for any other reason than that they make our ethics work better? ------

pp. 54 - 55

--But if our ultimate desires are so highly contingent and malleable, what reason do we have for thinking that they are the basis for anything deserving the name of "objective value"? It doesn't seem that there needs to be anything good about the objects of our desires *themselves* in order for us to desire them as ultimate ends. It suffices for our brains to be wired in certain ways. It thus seems quite odd to call whatever one happens to have a foundational positive attitude or inclination toward "objectively valuable."--

To what extent is hedonism immune from a parallel problem?

Rawlette's hedonism may be immune (in itself) because normative qualia are what they are, no matter who feels them or for what reason they feel them. The effective altruists who are opposed to "tiling the universe with mouse orgasms" are perhaps tapping into some intuitions that there are other values besides simplistic "lots of pleasure, no pain".

Maybe Rawlette's brain is just wired to be more hedonism-leaning, and normative-qualia-theory-endorsing, than someone else's, who might disagree with her. How *should* our brains be wired, in terms of the values that inform our metaethics?

(After listening to the 2020 podcast with Rawlette and Gus Docker, I see that Rawlette favors qualia of goodness more essentially than qualia of pleasure. So then the question could come, let's say it's really cheap to produce mouse brains which constantly orgasm and dollar-for-dollar, this is the cheapest way (the only way, given resource constraints) to maximize normative qualia of any kind -- is there something lost?

--

pp. 64 - 66

----- Sidebar: does the moral realism of MSLN pass Rawlette's tests? -----

MSLN is my own natural theology and related theories. Rawlette's tests come up in the second pass notes, where I attempt to provide an answer to the question here.

Chapter 3

---- Sidebar: Why should human judgment track what it ["is"] human-judgment-independent? Why feelings? Why God's judgment? ------

I guess my answer would be "if we ask 'why should' judgment do something", the answer ultimately is "should / legitimacy itself impels judgment to do that". If we're looking for the glue that connects human judgment to Rawlette's normative qualia or to God's judgment, then there is some brute "should" (legitimacy) which does that, at the fundamental level.

p. 69 - 75

Feeling the quale of badness is bad, but should it be bad? From the MO perspective, God has to agree with us that bad is bad. But he doesn't have to agree that bad should be bad. We don't have to think that bad should be bad, either. (But Rawlette ought to have argued that we should somewhere in her book.)

> "MO" refers to the "metaphysical organism", a term from MSLN.

Where did the simantic word "bad" come from, and who defined it? Why is it legitimate that "bad" be bad?

> "Simantic word" is a term from MSLN.

--

p. 82

One can choose to forego goodness (can have thoughts to avoid goodness even though goodness feels like goodness). Could this choice be valid?

---- Sidebar: Something to ask during second reading: Is *Feeling of Value* a good example of an account of "ought as feeling", even something to hold up as a potential paragon of the view? -----

p. 91

What is the quale that gets us to listen to judgments that we have made about how good things are? Or to recognize the truth? Maybe "quale" is the wrong word. Is there such a thing as a "meta-quale", something found in a set of qualia, which can have a certain tendency? That might be the word.

Are human beings response machines, to feelings of value? Or are we persons, who see things according to *ourselves*? "I see that X is good." vs. "I am compelled to say that X is good because of how it feels".

--More simply put, "in a situation of conflict of motivations, one can predict the future choice of the subject from the algebraic sum of affective ratings of pleasure and displeasure, given by the subject, to the conflicting motivations."--

In the experiments connected with that statement, was there a dimension of conviction? The actual pains/pleasures tested were "sweetness and sourness", "temperature and fatigue", "chest fatigue and leg fatigue". What if they had tested sexual pleasure, something that is more loaded? Or something to do with religious devotion? (Hunger for someone fasting, perhaps.)

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pp. 95 - 96

Rawlette does not see normative qualia as being intentional -- i.e., essentially badness is not badness of an object, but rather badness in itself.

Isn't it our direct experience, though, that objects are bad (or good, etc.)? Isn't this as direct as our experience of goodness and badness themselves? (Or is it?)

If it is as direct, then we have a piece of evidence in favor of the universality of something normative outside each human (qualia of goodness and badness) and one against (we find goodness and badness in things in many different ways).

----- Sidebar: What is good is God's will, and God's will just is God, and just is all reality, in a sense even including what is bad, though the horror is bad. (A horror: Two goods that conflict?) -----

> This is more or less a restatement of ideas found in MSLN, in Legitimacy

Chapter 4

pp. 106 - 108

What is the definition of "good"? Not, "what instantiates goodness", but "what is this 'goodness' thing itself?"

What immediately comes to my mind: "what ought to be desirable / desired".

--

pp. 108 - 109 (footnote)

Rawlette contrasts a "good" criminal from a "good" taste by saying that a criminal would be good if you needed a criminal, but a taste is just good in itself. I don't think taste is necessarily good in itself. Maybe tasting something helps you be a certain kind of person. Then you might prefer more bitter, more plain, and less sweet food.

She might respond "isn't being a different kind of person ultimately more goodness-quale-having and less badness-quale-having?" Is it possible that being a good person is the point, and the goodness quale ought to only follow from the objective state of being a good person? We might be reassured that in a universe ruled by a God who has our salvation as an absolute interest of his, he will make sure that the things that appeal to us and persuade us (goodness qualia) actually do connect us with real goodness, reality, good states of being as instantiated, or things that we will be led to instantiate by the promise given by goodness qualia.

> Rawlette might reply "So what about people's disagreements over value?" The MSLN reply might be "Existence is provisional -- we will come to conform to God more, and the world will come to conform to God, so that in the end, all our valuings will be within the range allowed by God, and all promise of good will be fulfilled."

--

p. 110 - 111

Can goodness be predicated of real objects as opposed to phenomenal objects?

In the simantist view, everything that exists (in at least one meaning of "exist") is a phenomenal object. I think it's a Berkeleian thing to say that the potted plant I see just is the set of phenomena I experience. It would be simantist to say that the potted plant isn't just a bundle of sensations, but is a potted plant. So that goes a little further than a purely phenomenal object. It's a fusion of phenomena and concept. I see the plant as being beautiful, or, perhaps "that-particular-potted-plant-y" as well. "That-particular-potted-plant-y" has something to do with me, how I see that unique plant. I see goodness in that plant.

> "Simantism" is a part of MSLN. I have not read Berkeley (only have read about him).

Is it really good? Well, someone else may see an analogous plant, in their own experience-body. Is it really the same plant? It's arguable that it is, and that it isn't. It can be useful to say that it's the same, and sometimes it feels intuitively like it's the same, but sometimes it doesn't.

> "Experience body is a term from MSLN.

In simantism, we trust God to speak reality to us in an ultimately trustworthy way. If it seems that the plant is the same in someone else's world, then it is. Maybe from God's perspective, there is one simantic word for the plant that is seen by many different people, the word that gives rise to many different words.

So do goodness qualia go any further than to say "in my experience-body, this seems good to me right now"? I think Rawlette would want to be able to say "in everybody's experience-bodies, the simantic word 'goodness' is inherently a good thing", and thus if we know that everyone finds something good, it is good. Do we really know that other people exist, unless we know that God speaks them to us in a trustworthy way? Maybe we say "other people probably exist". Do we really know enough to say

what everyone finds good in a thing? If we reject materialism, then we are left with solipsisms (experience-bodies) that need a reason to not be solipsist. We are quasi-solipsists who can affect other people in ways we don't understand. We might want to know what is universally good, so that we can practically pursue it, but practically speaking, we can't know it.

I don't think this is Rawlette's project, but what would follow her project is to practically live according to the knowledge that "value comes from feeling". Her project might not be useful of ["if"] the project that might ought to follow hers doesn't work.

> "[...]if the project[...]". I'm not sure why Rawlette should be deterred by that thought. Maybe it's simple enough to say that we know when we experience good, and can choose it more and more. Unless the problem is that we don't know the effects our choice of goodness have on other people. Or that opinions differ on the goodness-quale is goodness idea. Maybe we are in a state where we are unsure that other people's phenomenal worlds are too similar to our own (perhaps a belief arising from some kind of immaterialism). In a "public reality" world, such as materialism, it might still be difficult to really know what was going on in other people's world, unless perhaps we have a kind of "benevolent panopticon AI".

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p. 113

--For example, we may not be able to think of the pleasure of a torturer without also feeling some empathy for his victim, and this may lead us to think that the badness of the torturer's pleasure is intrinsic rather than merely instrumental.--

So empathy makes us think it's bad. Is that trustworthy? In other words, the feeling of value makes us think things are good. Should that feeling be trusted? Or is it just "I happen to have felt a feeling, so I responded in a certain way" -- stimulus-response, rather than people responding to what is real.

--

p. 114

--What matters in determining the intrinsic value of pleasure is not what feelings we have when thinking *about* pleasure, but the feeling we have that *is* pleasure. We can have this latter feeling without contemplating it and without even consciously labeling it "pleasure." And if we manage to

direct our attention to this particular feeling -- all by itself, allowing no other associations to interfere -- I believe we will not be able to help but recognize that this feeling is intrinsically good.--

The simantic word "good" is good because God speaks it and the phenomena of it is unified with the concept (the set of all objectively/ human-independently good states of affairs). The coiner of "good" (God), connects it to reality. And it's hard to see how the simantic word "good" could fail to itself connect people to goodness, not be the criterion for goodness -- by definition. But otherwise, we might wonder if the feeling of good is only good in itself, but not an exhaustive definition of what good really is. Good, conceptually, can lie outside of the feeling of good.

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----- Sidebar: A difference between that which is unbearable and that which is bad. If we have reason to believe that humans ought to exist, ought to bear experiences, then experiences which are unbearable are bad, or something like bad. Given the God of MSLN, that which is unbearable will go away in the end, whether it be good or bad.

It's possible to find something unbearable, but not feel that it's bad. I can say that's been my experience with most of the (more or less) unbearable suffering I've had. It certainly sounds like a bad thing to cause unbearable pain to someone else, and I feel like that's bad, I judge that that's bad, even if my own experience of unbearable pain often enough has lacked that judgment. So it's not in unbearable pain itself that there is badness, but in the idea of unbearable pain, or of causing unbearable pain. At least, I'm one data point against a claim that we all always find unbearable pain to be bad when, in that, we experience it.

Rawlette might say it's not my judgment that something is bad that is the real badness which necessarily follows from the experience of pain, but rather something else, true badness, the feeling of badness, pre-rational / no-B.S. badness, maybe one of those things.

But then, perhaps that begs the question away from the possibility that value is an opinion rather than a feeling.

> I'm not sure that it would literally beg the question, but it could do something in the neighborhood of begging the question.

What I felt wasn't badness, but unbearability. Does Rawlette want to say that I didn't understand the words I was using, and that if I had been more reflective, I would have said "unbearability is really that, plus badness"? Badness is something that I see, or I don't see. Maybe I would know if I didn't see badness in something. Did I *feel* badness, and that makes all the

difference? I don't *see* that very claim. I act based on what I *see*, not on what I *feel*. I think the idea of Rawlette's project is to convince us to see feeling itself, and thus see according to its deliverance. But if I see badness, or don't see it, in ways that weaken Rawlette's argument, then should I see feeling as fundamental, or does my (non)seeing of badness cancel out her claim that I ought to have seen myself as having felt badness, and that that seeing is binding on my actions.["?"]

(But I think I really just didn't even *feel* badness, but rather just unbearability.)

Is it okay for seeing to be as direct as feeling? I think so, because seeing is fundamental to seeing that feeling is the foundation of values -- or of seeing that it is not. Some feeling has to be something like "properly basic".

--

Chapter 5

pp. 126 - 127

Rawlette mentions problems with utilitarian calculus, additive, bites the bullet with "there's no other way to be realist, no other judgment-independent fact to ground moral realism".

Because we are concerned with how to live out morality, as well as knowing exactly where it comes from, might we accept the MO argument as a source of practical guidance, a probabilistic non-human ground for moral realism?

--

pp. 127 - 128

Rawlette wants to say that the qualia of others matters as much as that of oneself. We might want to agree but be uncertain due to an innate pre-rational valuing of what we see directly over what we don't. And this can be justified rationally by thoughts of solipsism. (So we might need to argue against solipsism to justify stringent moral concern.)

--

p. 128

--I have argued that when we experience normative qualia, our experience is characterized by intrinsic goodness or badness; that is, it is characterized by the feeling that the very experience we are having is such that it either ought to be happening or ought not to be happening (though the feeling itself is just a *feeling*, not an awareness of or assent to any particular propositional characterization of it). We might wonder, though, whether

the experience is really best described as being one of agent-neutral value, as being a blanket "ought-to-be-ness" or "ought-not-to-be-ness."--

Maybe what we really want to maximize is "ought-to-be-ness", rather than pleasure. Or, to read all of Rawlette's "pleasure"s as "ought-to-be-ness"es. In that case, what she's talking about is perception of ought, maybe a pre-rational perception of ought. Why should the perception of ought have anything to do with the real thing? It might, as much as perceiving anything does, that is, we are justified in thinking something we see exists until there is a defeater. So in terms of action, the perception of ought forms a soft realism -- we should probably act to minimize the feeling of ought-not-to-be-ness and maximize the feeling of ought-to-be-ness. This sounds sort of like preference utilitarianism. How does "ought-to-be-ness" differ from "preference"? Perhaps Rawlette is saying that what you ought to prefer is what you feel like preferring, and that what you feel like preferring is pleasure, what you feel like not preferring is pain.

> Rawlette might say "it's not that Object X is necessarily good because it occasions qualia of ought-to-be-ness, but that qualia of ought-to-be-ness ought to be." But why should my perception of the ought-to-be-ness of ought-to-be-ness indicate true value? I think Rawlette probably does address this in some way, but I have forgotten how.

I don't tend to find my own pain provoking "ought-not-to-be-ness" -- even if it's unbearable. Is it that I'm diseased, and can't adequately reconcile myself to my feelings? Or is it that my feelings stand apart from me and the truth -- have some connection, but no hard, necessary connection to either me or the truth?

--

p. 130

Rawlette says that "ought-not-to-be-ness/ought-to-be-ness"/"pain/pleasure" are more fundamental than the concept of action and arise earlier in a person's mental development.

This raises the question: when an infant feels pain, do we have any reason to say that they feel "ought-not-to-be", as opposed to feeling "unbearability"?

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------ Sidebar: Feeling of love vs. opinion of love. When you fall in love, do you have a choice whether you love the other person? If you don't have a choice, was it really *you* who fell in love? Usually this is a moot point in longer-term relationships because there are times when people are hard to love and if you believe you really love them, you have to prove it by

deliberately choosing to love.

But it's possible that on rare occasions, there's never a clear test of love, whether it's *you* who loves, or whether you're just filled with a spirit of love, outside of who you are.

We might be able to induce the spirit of love artificially, but if it means anything for a person, themselves, to love or value someone, then that couldn't be induced artificially. The opinion of love is something that has to flow from you, while the feeling of love does not ultimately have to.

It's possible to have the feeling of love, but have an opposite opinion. Likewise having the opinion of love, but having opposite feelings.

Maybe if you have the feeling of love, without it ever having been put to the test, you could ask yourself if your opinion appeared to be in line with that feeling. You might have prima facie reason to believe that you had the opinion of love, such as would survive the loss of the spirit or feeling of love.

The opinion of love is connected to respect. Seeing people a certain way is part of respect.

The spirit of love causes the feeling of love, which inclines you to have the opinion of love. ------

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p. 144 - 145

What if there are particular different ought-to-be-nesses, and we need to "collect them all"? It's possible that things that ought to be, when instantiated, conflict with each other. Perhaps we ought to be content -- there's a special "ought to be" to contentment -- and maybe that makes sense, if we think of contentment as the ultimate, global sense of "ought to be" -- "all's well". Contentment is at odds with maximization, unless maximization hits some kind of hard limit.

Feeling of Value notes, 145 -

(con't)

If you think the world should be a better place, then you are connected with some kind of bad -- which gives you a quale of "ought-not-to-be-ness". Is it better to find the world good, or to make the world good?

You can get tired of a specific bad, including the bad of "ought-to-keep-improving". Maybe we will get tired of all "ought-not-to-be"s and eliminate them all, settling for a certain level of "ought-to-be". This requires contentment.

Maybe "ought-to-be" and "ought-not-to-be" are binary, without degrees. That which ought to be, ought to be. That which ought not to be, ought not to be. There is no neutral zone. Everything that we might think is neutral, ought to be. So then there is no way to pile up infinite ought-to-be. Once we have eliminated ought-not-to-be, there is no point in striving, because plain experience is as good as exciting experience.

> This reminds me of MSLN's population ethics, the "rest view".

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pp. 140 - 149

Is Rawlette going to support the Repugnant Conclusion? How would this make sense?

How do people make sense of lives that are barely worth living? Hope? Endurance? You never know, if you hang in there, things could get better. Another factor might be self-love. People love themselves more than they love the quality of their lives.

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p. 152

--First, even on this view, it would never actually be the case that we ought to produce many billions of people living only barely happy lives, rather than a smaller number of people living happier lives. The resources necessary to produce the huge population would actually produce more total happiness if they were concentrated on fewer individuals, just because it takes so many resources to produce and maintain each additional life, before we can start increasing its happiness.--

This is an interesting empirical claim.

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Intro to Part III

p. 164

Rawlette is relatively content to concern us with situations we are likely to find ourselves in. Does hedonistic utilitarianism work the same ways as our intuitions in those? Where the "tails don't come apart".

> "Tails don't come apart" is a reference to this Slate Star Codex post.

But EAs (longtermists, especially) contemplate plausible futures where things get weird / where the tails would come apart.

--

Ch. 6

p. 169

In deontological moral systems, we say "X is wrong". In consequentialism, we say "Pain/disutility is wrong. X is instrumentally bad in avoiding disutility." Having X be immediately wrong strengthens our aversion to it. So, utilitarianism could weaken our motivation to not do bad, or to do good. Rawlette wants to strengthen our motivation -- that's the (or a?) point of moral realism.

A utilitarian could say "When I'm doing my moral philosophy, I'm a utilitarian, but in my unreflective daily life, I'm a deontologist."

The trolley problem: thinking it through could weaken your desire to not harm people in the $>99\%$ of cases that are not isomorphic to trolley problems. Not thinking it through could weaken your ability to act in the $<1\%$ of cases that are.

What is utilitarianism good for? Why have a simplistic moral framework? It can be extended into weird cases, like administering a government or designing an AI. Are government people professionally utilitarians and privately deontologists? Is there any spillover between one's professional and personal lives?

--

Sidebar: Humans don't necessarily know what is best in the end. God does. God's will is in itself not to be violated. "What is best in the end" is in conformity with God's will. God's will ordains both the rules and the final outcome. It is possible that by obeying the rules, we always are furthering the best final outcome. The basic motivator of consequentialism ("things need to turn out well in the end") and deontology ("to kill, lie, steal, etc. are immediately wrong") can both be satisfied by a theistic metaethics.

> This is a strong claim that I would need to do more work to endorse.

Having said that, the Bible (at least) specifically contains relaxations of its own rules. Therefore, humans may not always know for sure that a rule that we think we ought to obey is really one of the fundamental rules that God really cares about necessarily. Apart from the Bible, or other holy books, it might prove difficult to come up with sets of rules, and definitions of those rules, which are culture-invariant. Therefore we might find it hard to be completely sure that we really know what the rules

should be.

However, the existence of God allows us to think that it is possible that things could be wrong in themselves, even if we're wrong in our thinking about which things are wrong in themselves.

I suppose we have to argue that "being wrong in itself" is necessarily just "being a violation of God's will in itself". Wrongness would have to be defined as "what ought not to be" and then "ought" is simply "what is in the ultimate opinion".

Contemplating the above makes me feel at least a little more motivated to be deontological (in a Christian way) than consequentialist. -----

p. 185

Mention of perspectival bias. Preference for the interests of oneself. I think it's possible to act as though you think your interests are better than others, out of compulsion or instinct, but not really believe that you are any more deserving than anyone else.

How you behave when not under compulsion or in a state of instinct-satisfaction might reflect your real views about the values of yourself and others.

How hard should you work against instincts and psychological compulsion?

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p. 189

--This sort of decision procedure -- one that prohibits certain actions unless utility is overwhelmingly on the side of performing them (and perhaps allows certain other actions unless utility is overwhelmingly on the side of not performing them) -- looks an awful lot like the decision procedure our moral intuitions prompt us to follow.--

The function of moral reasoning is to fulfill moral intuitions? Someone like a NT Pharisee imposing rules that are neither fulfillments of human moral intuitions nor God's will. Keeping people from healing on the Sabbath. If you go away from common moral intuitions, what's your justification?

--

----- Sidebar: Say that I am worth something apart from my life: I am worth preserving even if my life isn't worth living. Where does the feeling of value exist? In me, or in my life? Doesn't my life contain all my qualia? Or is it the case that there's part of my experience which is not me, and part which is me? If the experience which is me is bad, then I am not worth living? But do I experience that experience? What is the "I" in the

preceding sentence?

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----- Sidebar: The truth: if you go hard enough against society, you will tend to have unbearable experiences as it beats you down, and these will teach you to value feeling okay, and thus you don't go against what society values. (1984's Ministry of Love.) -----

Ch. 7

p. 206 -- Pain is a present feeling that dissuades us from doing things that will lead to death or future pain. Do humans need to be the ones who take care of themselves, or could AI do that for them? If the latter, then they don't need to feel pain anymore. And people will probably choose that, once they trust the AI, unless they have some kind of reason not to be hedonists (psychological or philosophical reason, psychological or philosophical hedonists).

If concern for ultimate good feeling for as long as possible is what hedonism really is or ought to be, in a more steel-man version of hedonism, then what if we consider the possible existence of God (MO)? Or a stronger proof of the existence of God? In a sense, hell is a hedonistic argument for allegiance to God. So Rawlette's hedonism might lead naturally into at least an attempt to connect with or believe in God.

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p. 208

Rawlette says that she takes care of the objection that some things ought to cause more pleasure than others by founding that ought in future pleasures. What if people take great pleasure in building pyramids (in San Diego), whereas in parts of Los Angeles, people derive great pleasure from building ziggurats? This leading to tensions between the Angelenos, those who are into pyramids, and those who are into ziggurats, spilling over into conflict between San Diego and Los Angeles at the governmental level. Some people in San Diego try to build both pyramids and ziggurats, and they are at odds with everyon else. You have to build one kind of monument or the other, or even if you choose both, that's a political statement. Is there a rational way to sort this out? It's unclear which option will lead to the greatest pleasure or pain. Currently, the ziggurat-Angelenos derive a great deal of pleasure from ziggurats, and will continue to derive pleasure from future ziggurats, so they want to keep going with that. The pyramidists, likewise, except with pyramids instead of ziggurats. Which of the two should give more pleasure? Or if we choose both, then should we find both to give pleasure? By choosing both, we're probably only going to be able to devote the same amount of resources to both as we could have just to one. So "both" competes with "ziggurat" and

"pyramid". It's a cultural thing.

What we could do, is sand down culture until nobody cares about anything but the basics of life. This is a process that modern culture has already done to a large extent. But should it have? One casualty is meaning. Fewer things mean as much to us, because we're so fixated on our own present and future pleasure and pain. It's all about human beings, and humans can't see outside their own concept of well-being. Our concept of well-being controls our concept of what ought to give us pleasure and pain.

The pyramid/ziggurat example is a little contrived, but maybe consider the war between people who value courage and those who value pragmatism. Which ought we to "take more pleasure in"? "Take more pleasure in" almost begs the question from the beginning in favor of pragmatism. Courage wants us to be willing to lay down our lives and disregard our personal comfort. Otherwise we live in fear, inside ourselves. Because courage is a negation of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, how can we value it without rejecting hedonism? How can hedonism figure out if courage ought to be pleasurable (or, in Rawlette's more plausible terminology, one which gives the quale of "ought-to-beness")? Can hedonism give that result without undermining itself? Or does hedonism as a framework automatically bias a thinker (or even force a thinker) to say "courage, the independence people have from survival and well-being, is invalid, by definition"? So then is there some meta-framework to determine whether to be pragmatic or courageous? This would tell us whether we ought to find ought-to-be-ness in courage or pragmatism, and thus provide the input to our hedonism. I don't think hedonism can answer the question of whether courage or pragmatism ought to be found trustworthy, because hedonism lends itself to pragmatism. Maybe hedonism is a species of pragmatism, or vice versa.

I guess this gets back to the question "is our sense of ought-to-be a reliable guide to what really ought to be?" If we say "Yes" or even say "Yes, by definition", then whatever we all agree ought to be, ought to be. And currently, something like hedonism could succeed in capturing that sociological reality. We will not be able to value things like pyramids or ziggurats. Or religious texts, or God, etc... this war against the impractical has been waged slowly for a long time. But again, if a hedonist is like Rawlette, they need to look into the somewhat unknown future, and also consider whether God exists, because his existence could have the greatest effect on maximizing hedonism of any fact.

(Maybe better than the ziggurat/pyramid example: American Indians find their land to be sacred. It gives them a feeling of "ought-to-be". But white Americans find the Indian land to be useful. This also gives them a feeling of "ought-to-be". The Indians have a choice, hold onto the sacred land, or sell it. As long as it's sacred, they have to hold onto it. If it remains sacred, they will get the most ought-to-beness in the future out of holding onto it.

If they persuade themselves to no longer find it sacred, then they will get the most ought-to-beness in the future out of selling it. Perhaps Rawlette would say "Well, they just have to somehow know which one gives them more ought-to-be-ness and pick that one" (which goes against the very mindset of sacredness). But even then, the difference between the two (projected) ought-to-be-ness qualia might be so small as to be impossible to tell apart, and then we would still have the problem of figuring out what ought to give pleasure.)

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----- Sidebar: Rawlette relies a lot on phenomenology. A phenomenological being (I could say) has to see the qualia of positivity and negativity as good and bad. There's nothing else. But in contrast to a phenomenlogical being, there could be a personal being. Do *you*, the human you are, by your lights, see such qualia as inherently good or bad? What Rawlette might be wanting to do is to reduce the personal, opinion-having person to the phenomenological person, as a way to avoid the problems of establishing what is the best opinion.

Can opinion overrule phenomenology? If not, why not? We're looking to know what our opinions should be. If in our opinions our opinions should not necessarily just be what the phenomenological self would choose, then how can we be wrong?

Rawlette might ought to have spent more time on phenomenology. -----

> To be fair, phenomenology is well-known and by now basic, and perhaps I'm the one who should have gotten sufficiently familiar with it before reading *The Feeling of Value*.

----- Sidebar: Something that makes me queasy about hedonism: the focus on self-reward. This would make me queasy about preferentialism as well. About all utilitarianism? The love of wealth. Unless the ultimate wealth to be free of wealth-thinking. -----

Post-Reading Notes:

p. 218

Rawlette says that hedonists find it furthers hedonism to find things to be intrinsically valuable. If we remembered hedonism all the time, we couldn't do this. We would always be plugging things into a utility calculus.

Is it as though there are two people? The utility calculator and the one who finds things intrinsically valuable?

Parallels to MSLN: in MSLN, we might value another person because that's

what God wants. Do we need to forget that God wants that in order to value the person, or can we keep both in mind? To think "God values you" doesn't take away from "I value you". So is it the same thing with hedonism? "Valuing you maximizes utility" and "I value you" -- "you serve a purpose" and "you are valuable in yourself" -- are different from "you are valuable in yourself according to the Ultimate Opinion" and "you are valuable in yourself according to my opinion".

> A utilitarian could say "you are valuable in yourself according to the fact that you contribute to aggregated well-being". But there's still a difference between "I value you", plain and simple (I see you to be valuable in yourself), and "I value you you because of this abstract and holistic line of thinking I'm into". The utilitarianism may be valid, but it's less personal than "I value you".

Perhaps if we value other people because that's what God wants, and we feel compelled to claim that we have the same opinions as God, then that's not as clean a connection to intrinsic value. But if we identify our opinions with God's opinion, then there's a merger between "objective value values you" and "I value you". "I" become, in a sense, one with God, and so my opinion is the Ultimate Opinion.

> By analogy, the difference between teleological theory of mind ("I can figure out A, B, and C about you, which enables me to project that you will do or feel D") and mentalization ("I have a comfortable, intuitively mirroring grasp of your mental process."). As we become comfortable and more fully trusting in our relationship with God, we develop an effortless kinship with him, which inclines our opinions to track his.

Is it possible to have an opinion about something if God does not exist (simantism and legitimism)?

> See https://formulalessness.blogspot.com/2020/06/simantism.html and legitimism.

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> The following section was going to be the opening to the review, as presented to effective altruists.

What is the good of a moral philosophy? A way to program AI, or to program humans. AI don't have their own intuitions, unless we give them intuitions. But we have intuitions, either from birth or from education. In either case, inherited from our ancestors.

> I could add that intuitions might come from spirits (beings or perhaps less-personal psychic forces), noetic relationships, or be something like ESP, as well. Noetic relationships would be the way that we just know that certain things are or are not good, or that there is such a thing as good in the first place. We have contact with what is real through our intuitions.

Humans can say "I know what's right" based on intuition, and thus choose to disregard a bad moral philosophy. A moral philosophy might be bad for being incomplete, or giving "counter-intuitive" results. AI don't have that counterweight. Humans can judge moral philosophies to be bad, as they have some kind of privileged information, not derived from the words and thought structures of moral philosophy, about what is right or wrong.

But humans can be persuaded by moral philosophy. If they accept it, having found it trustworthy in familiar things, they can extend it into unfamiliar areas. (Should they? Is that a valid way to proceed?) But they can always say "that seems too counter-intuitive, let's not be insane here" and back off a weird result from moral philosophy. It's possible for people to switch back and forth arbitrarily (or intuitively) between moral philosophy and moral intuition.

A longtermist might ought to care about this human programming. If people become more rational over time, they will lean harder on moral philosophy in forming their moral intuitions. So we could see things we currently consider insane becoming normal in the future, if people can bite the bullet and accept reason. But intuition might know better than reason in this area. After all, the whole point of moral philosophy was to represent intuition better. One might think that someone like Bentham wanted to extend personal values of happiness into the weirder world of government. His utilitarianism may have lined up with sane values, with moral intuition. But the idea of hedonistic utilitarianism itself, unmoored from intuition, might give us insane results, like wanting to "tile the universe with mouse brains having orgasms", or whatever other kind of simplistic bliss. Reason can have a corrosive effect on intuition as expressed by culture, and we can't necessarily take for granted that humans in the future will stay in touch with any recognizable intuitions of our own. How this might cash out could be something like "mouse brain orgasms" or "yes machines" (beings that say yes to everything, which prefer everything so as to make preferentialism trivial to satisfy). The intuition that reason ought to be applied consistently in moral areas, and thus that moral consideration ought to be applied to people (or other sentient beings) equally, the extension of the moral circle, might be rolled back to extreme regressiveness -- from just our point of view, or in some way independent of our reason and intuition nowadays? (How could that happen? Maybe it becomes too impractical to actually help all sentient

beings -- maybe panpsychism is both too compelling and too practically difficult to respond to, or maybe something like wild animal suffering proves intractable, and people come up with some reason to say "well, morality is based on intuition, right? It's not based in any fact of the matter, right? So we can kind of rewrite it as is convenient for us". Similarly, once survival pressure is off of the decision-makers (presumably humans or a human elite, if we manage to keep control of AI), we may stop caring about reason, not being forced to by competition or the struggle to survive.) Everything any longtermist works for now could be made futile at some point in the future due to the change in moral intuitions caused by the evolution of culture according to moral philosophy. And how can we say that what longtermists care about now ought to apply to people in the future? Unless somehow there is a true note of moral reality which is buried for some reason in human biology or past culture, which the present can hear better than the future can.

> "Longtermist" is a term from effective altruism, people who seek to benefit the far future.

Once changed by moral philosophy (or some irrational force), can it be said that moral intuition is wrong? We might think so, with respect to past moral intuition. But once changed, past moral intuition would now be wrong. If anything can take over the formation of moral intuition, could such a being rewrite what morality actually is? And thus justify whatever it wanted -- really justify, not just convince people that it was justified. Or is morality founded in something that does not change?

All this gives us reason to wonder if we can know a history-invariant morality. It would have to be independent of the judgments of human beings -- we know this because human judgments change over time. It would have to be some kind of moral realism.

This is one motivation for reading *The Feeling of Value*, a book which attempts to ground moral realism in phenomenal consciousness and not in human judgment -- perhaps a candidate for a history-invariant morality. It [this motivation] is not given [as a reason for seeking a moral realist theory] by the author, Sharon Hewitt Rawlette <check>. But she does point to a short-termist reason to be into moral realism, which is that it can overcome perspectival bias and thus motivate people to do whatever it is people already know to do from their moral intuitions but don't do because they don't have a motivating moral philosophy.

> "Short-termism" is a term for altruism in the short term (within a few decades or so).

So her book is something that at least some EAs would or ought to be interested in reading. So what follows is a summary of the book, and then

some of my thoughts on how successful I think her project is.

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> I happened across something related to this project in a novel I read.

Bearable vs. ought:

Rosamunde Pilcher, *Another View*, p. 84, 1989 ed.

"How could you bear to go and swim? You'll die of pneumonia."

(Emma went swimming on a cold day and came back. Robert is concerned for her and thinks she's done something foolish.)

[This is as much context as is needed for the purposes of the review.]

As though a voice tells you not to swim, but you endure it and swim anyway? Or your impending death is something that ought to scare you but you ignore it by bearing it?

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> A personal note.

My feelings/thoughts for/about [Person X] are ones that I endure -- they are lightweight -- they are pleasant -- but there is something inherently unbearable about them, which I endure.

Maybe more clear is to think about one specific thought/feeling complex, the intuitive life reality of [Person X]. I can intuit this as a simple thing. It is pleasant, lightweight, and something I have to bear.

> "Life reality" definition.

What is the ought-to-be-ness of this one simple thing that I intuit? It seems somewhat orthogonal to me, like it is neither. The one feeling has both the ought-to-be-ness of pleasantness and the ought-not-to-be-ness of its burdensomeness.

Burdens can be borne and the weightier, the closer to being unbearable.

Pains can also be unbearable. Is it that the pains themselves are burdensome? Or that some pains and burdens often go together?

I think that for my purposes "burden" means "that which, if you have enough of it, it is unbearable".

What is the opposite of something needing to be borne? Something being attractive?

> This may be a source of this post

Labels: #book review, #Slate Star Codex

Book Review Notes: The Feeling of Value, pass 2

%feeling-value-notes-pass2

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

See also the main review for The Feeling of Value.

> These are the notes on my second pass reading *The Feeling of Value*. I was trying to write a summary of the book during this pass.
>
> I have added comments in blockquotes. Quotes from Rawlette are sometimes set off with --'s.

Feeling of Value Summary, ch 1 - 3

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Introduction:

Brief overview of the whole book.

Chaper 1:

pp. 7 - 10

People doubt whether moral realism is worth thinking about. Rawlette says she will show how the extra effort of thinking about it helps us to overcome some of our biases and motivate us more.

The realism/anti-realism distinction

pp. 10 - 15

Rawlette gives a definition for realism vs. anti-realism in normative affairs. She discusses constructivism and projectivism as actually being anti-realist. She explains why she prefers "judgment-independence" to "mind-independence" as criterion for realism. (When you experience pain or pleasure, that very experience in your mind grounds right and wrong on her view.)

Arguments that belief in antirealism shouldn't affect our first-order normative judgments

pp. 15 - 18

Rawlette discusses some of the views of anti-realists, which claim that coming to be an anti-realist does not affect what you care about. She asserts that it does, because you lose the sense that you need to conform your moral judgments to what it judgment-independent.

Perspectival bias

pp. 19 - 22

Rawlette discusses perspectival bias ("human beings, as we actually are, are not equally motivated to attend to the interests of all other human beings"). Then considers realism vs. anti-realism with respect to how their metaethical views ought to affect their perspectival bias.

pp. 22 - 25

----- New question: Rawlette says that people who come to believe that their experience has a certain value, will see that other people's experiences have similar value when they are similar. And thus we come to overcome perspectival bias. That may follow, but is it possible that in reality, what often happens is that people do not value their own experience (don't consider their pain objectively wrong), but happen to live according to it? Perhaps because it's unbearable to do otherwise. But it is bearable to not live like other people's experiences have inherent value, to not [or "so that they do not"] hurt the pained person, for instance. They do not value their own experience, and, fairly enough, don't value other people's. So judgment-independence may more essentially lead to people treating everyone the same, but only in the moral component. We are really more motivated by what is bearable, not what is right or wrong. So something has to convince us to push against following what is bearable or unbearable, if we're really to be motivated to overcome our perspectival bias in a practical sense. Establishing that what happens to you matters morally, if it can overcome bearability/unbearability is a step that Rawlette maybe contributes toward later.

You can be morally realist, but if you base your moral realism on your own perceptions of "ought-to-be-ness", then if you don't happen to have strong senses of that, you may feel little reason to go out of your way to care about other people's well-being. You will still act like you care about yourself because you can't bear all the hungers, pains, etc. that impinge on you. ------

Rawlette tries to show how judgment-independence itself causes us to work against our perspectival biases. We see that we experience the value of pleasure / disvalue of pain, and think, if that is true for me, it must be true for anyone else's pleasure / pain.

Conclusion

pp. 25 - 26

Summary of Chapter 1

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Chapter 2:

pp. 27 - 28

Brief overview of chapter 2. There are realisms that Rawlette rejects, and her realism is built as a response to their flaws.

pp. 28 - 40 *Intuitionism*

Rawlette criticizes intuitionism, on the grounds that people's moral intuitions can contradict. Therefore what seems self-evident (or in her terms, "self-justifying") can't be trusted in.

pp. 40 - 48 *Minimal realism*

----- Sidebar: on p. 45, Rawlette says that mathematical realism doesn't have a practical outcome, but moral realism does (for reasons she gave in ch. 1). I think mathematical realism could have a practical outcome. A simantist view of mathematics is that you relate to mathematical objects, so they are real. To call them real is an affirmation of your experience and you seeing things from your own point of view as a person, rather than denying what you see. Your perception is valid because God speaks mathematics. What you perceive has a deeper reality because God follows up on it. So mathematical realism can found or aid an honest, personalist, trusting approach to life, when supported by simantist theism. -----

> For "simantism" see here.

Rawlette rejects minimal realism (the view that metaphysical questions do not apply to ethics because there is nothing "out there" in the world that informs them) because it implies that moral facts have no connection to moral judgments. If we have moral judgments, they are not evidence of moral facts. But if this is so, then we are effectively anti-realists, so this position is not effectively a form of realism.

pp. 48 - 58 *Ideal-observer theory*

----- Sidebar: When you encounter a qualia [quale] of ought-to-be-ness, is that in fact essentially the statement "you should find this experience valuable"? Why should we trust random feelings in this? -----

----- Sidebar: on p. 54, Rawlette mentions that desires (an element of an ideal-observer theory) can be known to be entirely contingent, on "evolutionary and personal history" and that we could theoretically "change people's ultimate desires by rewiring their brains to give them

positive attitudes toward different objects".

Then she says --But if our ultimate desires are so highly contingent and malleable, what reason do we have for thinking that they are the basis for anything deserving of the name of "objective value"?--

Aren't normative qualia produced just as much through these contingent processes? Yes, but they still are attractive or unbearable in themselves (or valuable / disvaluable). -----

Rawlette rejects ideal-observer theories, which say that a person can find judgment-independent moral truth by imagining their idealized, more or less omniscient self's desires, because these theories depend on desires, which can be arbitrary and contingent, and are thus really anti-realisms.

pp. 58 - 63 *Synthetic naturalism*

----- Sidebar: Dworkin's "morons" (see for instance p. 47) make me think. If one should be skeptical of the existence of morality because we would need fundamental moral particles, and materialism / physicalism does not observe such things, maybe this is evidence for panpsychism or personalism. But even panpsychism may only give us descriptive experience and not normative experience. (Descriptive consciousness and not normative consciousness.) Normative consciousness being opinions that things should be a certain way. Can opinions have their own fundamental particles? Or are they fundamentally persons or parts of persons?

There could be a moral argument against the desirability of believing in materialism / physicalism: materialism undermines moral realism. Moral realism undoes some perspectival bias. (I could add, motivates people to do their best, more than they would naturally want.) Undoing perspectival bias effectively expands the moral circle. So materialism comes at a cost, reducing altruism at least on the above dimensions.

Morality is presented in stark terms. We become more moral because of it [the presentation of morality], but not really. The absolute moves us but we forget the absolute. Living up to an absolute is hard, even if the absolute is "do your best" or "no luxury". Arguably (hopefully), it isn't so hard if you have a supportive culture, which we currently don't have. But as you solve problems, you make the urgency of altruism fade. Maybe this has already happened. Only a relatively few enthusiasts pursue altruism in their own time. Maybe the rest would be motivated if it was clear that "we're all in this together and we have to work for each other". So altruism naturally slacks off as things improve. Unless, the altruists are motivated by a standard stricter than what seems to tend to satisfy most people. Or even, that most people can come to have that standard, that in a sense requires them to have better lives than they want to have. -----

Rawlette rejects synthetic naturalism as a route to moral realism because it does not offer an account of what goodness is. Synthetic naturalism says that certain physical properties are the same as what is good, perhaps ones which causally regulate our saying "good" in a homeostatic way. (I don't fully understand this section, but this is my understanding.) Unfortunately, there are different ways that we could have evolved to say "good", perhaps due to being on different planets or in different cultures. So we aren't talking about the same thing when we say 'good', talking to someone from a different background. So this can't be the foundation of judgment-independent moral realism. We haven't figured out what "good" means in a way that justifies it against some kind of disagreement.

(I think I would understand this section better if I knew what was meant by "causal regulation". A quick search didn't reveal a definition, and I didn't feel like digging to find one.)

pp. 64 - 66 *Criteria for a plausible realism*

Rawlette gives four criteria for a plausible realism:

1) "An account of our concept of goodness". It may have to be a circular definition, in the end, or a description rather than a definition. Have some idea of what this "goodness" idea is.

2) "An explanation of the way in which things in the world objectively satisfy our concept of goodness." There has to be some connection with the way things are (as far as we can perceive them) and our judgment that they are good.

3) "An explanation of the way in which we can come to *know* which things objectively satisfy our concept of goodness." We have to be able to know the reasons why we connect "good" to a thing or state of affairs.

4) "An explanation of why we are often mistaken about what is good." Given that we have some way to say "this is good", or for any thing, "this is good", and have reason to know it, why do people disagree on moral matters? Why is our view both true and not obvious, or not universally adopted?

Rawlette points out that the attempted realisms given earlier in the chapter do not pass her test, then mentions analytic descriptivism as a promising candidate, to consider in the next chapter.

> Does the moral realism associated with MSLN pass the test? 1) Goodness is a person, to be good is to be aligned with that person. 2) We can know some things about that person and what they want, and identify opportunities to do what they want in the world. 3) We can use reason to come up with a best guess as to what things are in line with the person of

goodness. 4) We are mistaken about morality because people have not come to believe in this person, and if they do believe, there is still room for disagreement because we don't always know 100% what the person wants.

Ch. 3

pp. 69 - 71

Rawlette introduces the subsequent chapter. Her argument will connect the feeling of goodness or badness to good and bad. In this way, there is something outside human judgment -- but still accessible to the human mind -- which can be the foundation of valuing and disvaluing.

pp. 72 - 75 *What are normative qualia?*

Normative qualia are the very qualia of goodness or badness, in their purest, most basic form. Rawlette wants to claim that the feeling of goodness is goodness itself, and the feeling of badness is badness itself.

----- Sidebar: Is there a quale of God? If so, then we can know that God exists just by seeing it (Reformed epistemology). But having seen it, we can then unsee it. Then, seeing it again, we wonder, does it really tell us that God exists? Does the appearance of something necessarily convey the reality behind it? On the other hand, we can't be wrong about seeing redness. But if we see redness, is there anything else that we should conclude? For instance, if I see red on my arm, I might think I was bleeding. It might be the case that I'm bleeding, but if I feel no pain, and my arm isn't wet to the touch there, then it probably isn't bleeding. The redness enters into a relationship with other things. So Rawlette's normative qualia may, or may not, have a connection to how things are in the world, or how we act. They are the appearances of good, which we would want to check with other facts that make something good. Rawlette wants to reduce those other facts to things which give us normative qualia, so that the value there is founded on those qualia. -----

----- Sidebar: Rawlette might say that an opinion necessarily contains normative qualia. An opinion, as experienced, involves a normative quale applied to an object. But, an opinion goes beyond just a normative quale. Instead, we ourselves affirm something as being worthy or unworthy. When you say "that thing is worthy", are you only saying "in my experience or judgment, that thing leads to normative qualia"? Or rather, the thing itself is worthy, in an undecomposed way? Are you in any way free to say "that is not good" to something with positive normative qualia? To say that positive normative qualia themselves are not inherently good? If you are free, then you are a person. If you are not free, you might not be. Do *you* really find things to be good (including normative qualia)? Or are you just saying what you have to say because normative qualia

compel you? -----

----- Sidebar: Is it possible to have normative qualia about normative qualia? In theory, it should be possible. It's certainly possible to have judgments about judgments and feelings about feelings. So if you have feelings of disvalue about feelings of value, or feelings of value about feelings of disvalue, what does that say? If these feelings are really separate, then Rawlette could say "looking at them non-intentionally, separately, we have good feelings of goodness and bad feelings of badness". But can they be separated? My experience with thinking about [Person X (see pass 1)] causes me to doubt that they can, or at least that some really are complicated, fusions of "ought-to-be-ness" and "ought-not-to-be-ness". So if my qualia of ought-to-be-ness itself had at least a tinge of ought-not-to-be-ness, then how firm a foundation could they be for moral realism? It would depend on how strong the ought-not-to-be element was. Or, perhaps, on how much we trusted or ought to trust quiet signals. The quiet can be more trustworthy than the loud.

> I think I may have meant "my overall attitude toward ought-to-be-ness in all its instances, or ought-to-be-ness in specific cases, could be ambivalent, and I would need some way to parse what the deeper ought is in a given situation, or on the whole." An ought-to-be quale which is actually ambivalent may not be ought-to-be.

There may be some people who are "ought-to-be-ness-blind". They perceive what Rawlette would find full of ought, and see no ought, only "this feels unbearable to me" or "this feels attractive to me". Are they like the "God-blind", who see no God in the universe? The God-seeing see the quale of God, but is there really a God? The ought-seer (Rawlette?) sees the quale of ought, but is there really ought?

That might be an argument against Rawlette, that if you assume that there is an ought, you might find it hard not to think that normative qualia are themselves good or bad intrinsically. But what if you're not sure that there even is an ought? Am I saying "a moral skeptic or anti-realist does not trust the proposition that there really is an ought, and so they won't find it in normative qualia, and thus Rawlette's argument doesn't turn them away from moral skepticism / anti-realism"? If so, then Rawlette's argument is at best useful on those who have a secret or not-so-secret moral realist side, underneath their layers of skepticism or anti-realism. -----

pp. 75 - 79 *The experience of pain*

Pain can be split into nociception and the feeling of badness. This feeling is not a judgment, but rather the perception of a quale of badness.

----- Sidebar: The opposite of "utility monster": a "utility pond". The pond is

just there. Fish may swim in it, frogs may go in and out. The sun shines on it, then goes below the horizon. It evaporates and is replenished. It only desires to be itself. And the boundaries of it even can vary.

Those maximally sensitive to normative qualia become utility monsters, those minimally sensitive become utility ponds. -----

----- Sidebar: Simantist take on qualia of badness in pain: it has badness, it really has it, because of who you are. -----

p. 79 - 86 *Phenomenology or behavioral disposition?*

Rawlette considers whether pain is simply nociception married to a disposition of aversion, apart from any phenomenology of badness, and says no, because we have empirical reasons to think that aversive behaviors and thoughts, and phenomenology, are not always connected. She points out that for some reason, aversive and attractive phenomenology affect decision-making, and so probably have an essential connection to reality, in themselves. We consider ourselves to have ethical responsibilities toward animals if we believe they feel pain, rather than mere exhibit aversive behavior.

pp. 87 - 94

The qualia of goodness and badness can be found in pleasures of all sorts, and pains of all sorts, in all pleasant and unpleasant experiences, as diverse as they may be (Rawlette quotes someone contrasting the pleasures of "a rock-and-roll band, or the taste of a great wine" (p. 92)). They are each one quale, or each a dimension of qualia (Rawlette doesn't think the distinction matters for her argument), distinct from whatever qualia make up an individual pleasant or unpleasant thing.

----- Sidebar: p. 91 - Cabanac's experiment shows that humans tend to flow toward maximizing pleasure, minimizing pain. "...their subsequent behavioral choices tend to produce the highest algebraic sum of pleasure as defined by these ratings." Hedonistic determinism -- we are ruled by our pleasure and pain, whatever happens to give us pleasure or pain. The ability to willingly endure pain is freedom. -----

pp. 95 - 100 *Objective normativity and non-intentionality*

Rawlette points out that normativity does not have to be intentional, that it can apply directly to the normative qualia themselves, and not have to apply to the objects that occasion the normative qualia.

----- Sidebar: p. 95 --The goal of this section, however, is to explain in detail a point I made earlier in this chapter: that the objective goodness or badness of the instantiations of normative qualia is not some goodness or badness that they supposedly confer on an object but the goodness or badness of the instantiations of the normative qualia themselves. Although

instantiations of normative qualia are very often associated with other phenomenal qualities or with physical objects -- as in the cases of pain and of disliking certain foods -- what is intrinsically good or bad is the goodness or badness itself, not an object that causes it or a sensation that happens to be felt simultaneously with it.--

Does Rawlette deny that objects can be good and bad in themselves, apart from the qualia they occasion? We certainly observe that objects can be good and bad. When we think about the qualia of goodness and badness, are we thinking about philosophical objects, to which we can ascribe "intrinsic goodness" or "intrinsic badness"? It seems like we are. Why not say of a rock "it is intrinsically good"? Is it impossible for a rock to always be good despite how it makes us feel? The rock itself, not just its qualia. If we say that objects do not have properties, we go against experience. Reducing the world to pure experience is a move we could make, in which it would seem that there is nothing except the qualia of value and disvalue, as far as what human beings can care about. But we do not experience a world of flat phenomenology, and instead, we, as things, relate to objects and persons, as things. It seems to me that we might want to try to rewrite all of our judgments so that we find intrinsic goodness only in the qualia of goodness and badness, those qualia taken as good or bad objects, and no other objects taken as good or bad objects, but how can we *know* that rocks are not intrinsically good? We could say that, in a sense, we can make a political or sociological decision to stop listening to the possibility of the intrinsic goodness of rocks, and this might be a pragmatic thing to do, but it doesn't seem like a fully justified thing to do from an epistemic standpoint. But if rocks can be intrinsically good, despite our feelings about them, then the qualia of normativity are not the only things that determine value. I think that may be what I get from Rawlette: I agree with her defense of those qualia as being good and bad in themselves, but I would say they are strongly *prima facie* good and bad, but that there are conflicts between them and other more or less strongly *prima facie* goods and bads, and there remains something to be done to sort them out. -----

pp. 100 - 101 *Conclusion*

Summary of the chapter.

----- Sidebar: What has the qualia of goodness or badness may always seem good or bad to any human, by definition, [";"? or "--"?] is "seeming-goodness/badness to all humans at all times" really the foundation of goodness and badness? It might be if we are being political/sociological, and assume that there are no judges besides humans. -----

> I think splitting the first sentence between "definition" and "is" allows it to make some sense.

----- Sidebar: (not directly based on reading, just a note I thought of): the qualia of goodness has to be found enriching by us, and the qualia of badness has to be found costly by us, and so we are biased to find them really good or really bad, from our perspectives. Whether our perspectives really matter, whether enrichment or costliness really matter, are separate questions. "Costliness matters" if effective in itself, is so as an opinion of a person. An ultimately valid person can affirm the provisional validity with which we say "ought-to-be-ness is good, ought-not-to-be-ness is bad". -----

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Feeling of Value Summary, ch. 4 - 7 (part)

Ch. 4 intro pp. 103 - 106

Rawlette introduces the chapter, saying that she wants to come up with descriptive content for her normativity.

----- Sidebar: In ordinarist terms, Rawlette is trying to motivate people to look at other people and their situations as deserving response ([what I just said potentially being] a way to write "overcome perspectival bias" in ordinarist terms). A moral anti-realist has ordinary morality, but lacks an ontological basis for it, and feels fine about it. Is an ontological basis really needed? Maybe, if it motivates overcoming perspectival bias. Or if somehow it can indicate that our ordinary understanding is wrong. But anti-realists seem to think it is not necessary. It may be a nice thing to have, but there doesn't have to be a rational grounding to all ordinary things.

> "Ordinarist" vs. "ontological" can be found explained here.

Is it really OK to make exceptions in reason? Where would this take us? We might feel nervous doing that, like there is something really at stake. So we perceive that there is such a thing as real value, for us to be nervous about losing. A qualia [quale] of "something-at-stake-ness". This qualia [quale] refers to gain and loss, rather than pleasure and pain. We could gain or lose orthogonally to pleasure or pain.

> Or orthogonally to qualia of ought-to-be-ness or ought-not-to-beness.

Somehow we know that perspectival bias is bad without a theory of moral realism. Do we need the theory of moral realism, or should we just say "don't have perspectival bias", and apply psychological pressure on those who do have it? Arguably, it is more polite to reason with people (less forceful, brutal).

Moral anti-realists do believe in the reality of morality, ordinaristically.

They act as though it is binding on them even if they don't have a reason why it should be binding on them, and even if they make up reasons why it's not real. There's a split between reason and lived life, and the lived life is in the ordinary.

Ordinaristically, we want a kind of wholeness between reason and experience. So an anti-realist ontologistic position on morality clashes with our ordinary experience of morality. So we might want to have no ontologistic theory of morality at all, or have one which gives a satisfying account of ordinaristic morality. As reasoning people, we find it hard to have no theory at all, but we can forget our anti-realist ontologist way of thinking when we are actually being moral.

One of the uses of moral reasoning is not just to establish that it really is, but potestas clavium-fashion to say what it is. If you want to believe in morality, there is a way to believe in it, and this conditions what kind of morality you can believe in [what specific things you consider right and wrong]. So theories of moral realism are useful as ways to discover or highlight aspects of ordinarist morality which we might have forgotten. When we see the theory open up some new dimension of reality, we may recognize as from a pre-existence the validity of its ordinarist conclusions, even if having heard them (e.g. the sermon "overcome perspectival bias"), we wouldn't have really believed in them, without the theoretical grounding.

> "Potestas clavium" comes from Lev Shestov's *Potestas Clavium*. It means "we find a rationale for our salvation, and then that rationale excludes some other people who don't measure up to it". In this case, the analogy is that when we come up with a justification for moral realism, it comes with baggage / help in making decisions / extra information.

pp. 106 - 117 *The Open Question Argument*

The Open Question Argument (of Moore) says that if you say "What is good is what is pleasant" then if you ask "is pleasure good?" it's like asking "Are pleasant things pleasant?" But asking "is pleasure good?" makes sense. So then, what is good? Rawlette thinks that the way out of this is to say that goodness itself is a quale -- locate it in something outside the world of human judgment. Then she considers and rejects objections to this thought, particularly those against pleasure being intrinsically good, or pain intrinsically bad.

----- Sidebar: pp. 106 - 107

Rawlette mentions the Open Question Argument, which seems to be saying

"If pleasure and good are the same, then we couldn't ask if pleasure was good". We could ask this question of a number of things: "Is receptivity to reality good? Is trust good? Is preference-satisfaction good? Is wealth good? Are pyramids/ziggurats good? Is freedom good? Is being yourself good? Is agency good? Is the creation of goodness itself good [i.e. something like Nietzsche's creation of values]?" A moral realism theory can remove some of those options, and try to reduce the rest down to its criterion. For instance, Rawlette could get rid of the ubermensch [Nietzschean] option and claim that preference-satisfaction is really only good in that it maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain. But from an ordinarist position, some or all of these things can be good in themselves. We see them to be so. So what makes them all good? How would we balance them? Is there a meta-axiology at play, in valuing one axiology more than another? Some kind of exchange rate between them? What in the world would determine that axiology? We could -- as moral anti-realists, we could arbitrarily say that some selection of axiologies weighted a certain way was the good. If we try something like what Rawlette proposes, we risk losing some good. Aren't preferences good in themselves? Isn't it possible that increasing preference satisfaction by one unit when you hardly have any is better then perfecting pleasure / pain when they are getting into diminishing returns?

Is there a moral realism that can be nuanced enough to include and properly balance all the different goods that exist? Something human-judgment-independent, forcing us out of perspectival bias and motivating us to be excellent, beyond what we, as the human species, naturally prefer? If God is the one who understands all goods and how to balance them, then it is good for us to base our moral realism in his opinion, his way of seeing reality. This preserves the ordinaristic plenitude of types of good. Can there be a plausible ontologistic reason why God's opinion is completely valid -- and which God is implied by such an ontology? -----

> God may invalidate some apparent goods, just as Rawlette's theory would. But it would be possible to find all apparent goods to be good, if God's opinion is really what grounds good. His opinion would not have to be a simplified calculation ("maximize positive normative qualia / minimize negative") but could be idiosyncratic and complex, just like our own axiologies are, and thus able to capture goodness that falls outside any criterion of simplistic reason.

----- Sidebar: Could it be that Rawlette's normative qualia are best not associated with pleasure and pain as we normally think of them? In that case, there could be a quale that we refer to verbally with "this should be". And this is the good, and it can apply to all that we ought to put in the grab bag of "things that humans ordinaristically think are good", and also

to the exchange rates between them. Or, this quale of "should" is how we identify the ordinaristic goods in the first place. Or, "quale" is an ontological way of describing that thing that we identify as good.

If Rawlette would accept that as following from her thinking, should I agree with it? Maybe God himself is trying to maximize his qualia of normativity, and will adjust our ways of feeling to fit his. -----

----- Does Rawlette want to legislate behavior based on her theory? Arguably yes -- and there are cases where it seems like she's being uncontroversial in that. (Opposing perspectival bias, or saying that pain is pro tanto bad.) But I can imagine -- and have some personal experience -- with the phenomenon of undergoing a great deal of pain in order to remain being myself. Should I be forced to be a different person so that I don't feel pain? Is being myself a good that can justify a lot of pain, and if it can't be justified, should I be forced to not be myself?

Is it that I got a great deal of pleasure from being myself? Not necessarily. Nor is it the case that I was necessarily motivated by some payoff in pleasure for myself or others in the future. I would have valued being myself anyway, even without hope of that. Looking back, I'm glad I did suffer for the sake of being myself. So I think this may say that I can value something that goes athwart hedonism.

But it is true that I found what I was doing to "ought-to-be". I felt "ought-to-be-ness" to it -- a kind of purpose (ungrounded as that purpose was in anything other than me being myself). The ought-to-be-ness of purpose enables you to discount the ought-not-to-be-ness of the moments of pain. Rawlette does say that goodness is really just "ought-to-be-ness" and badness "ought-not-to-be-ness". So perhaps I was experiencing value the whole time, despite my pain. But I think even if you told me that I wasn't experiencing value, or that the experience of value was not the intrinsic nature of value itself, I would still feel like I had done the right thing, as though being myself is a value in itself, apart from the experience of value. Somewhat like Nietzsche, I could look back on how I had been myself in some moment of true me-ness from the perspective of years later, and that one moment could give my life value, over and above all the moments of pleasure and pain I had felt. -----

> Perhaps another point to make would be to compare the quantity of ought-to-be-ness of being myself versus the quantity of ought-not-to-be-ness. While the quality of the qualia of ought-to-be-ness of being myself seem to have been higher (to me), the quantity was definitely less than the counterweighing qualia of ought-not-to-be-ness.

----- Sidebar: Seeing things to be so: a commingling of preferences and raw

perception. It's hard to separate the two. If I see something to be wrong, do I make it wrong, or is it always wrong? If I make it wrong, then I will immediately feel it's wrongness. The ambiguity between how meaning is inherent in what we look at, but it depends on who we are (our preferences), but it speaks to us according to its meaning beyond the force of our own wills. One lens on legitimacy is that it is a form of meaning. When we value things, we see them to be valuable. So there is an interplay between our preferences and external reality, which makes them valuable to us. Are they *really* valuable? Do they have a kind of transcendent legitimacy? Perhaps we gain true information about legitimacy through the valuings we make about things. Mixed with our preferences and personal ways of getting qualia out of external reality are qualia and meanings which we do not invent. But then, where did they come from? It's very tempting to say that legitimacy comes from something having been made the right way, or having been seen to be a certain way by someone who is qualified to see them that way. These criteria lean toward saying God is the source of legitimacy, and that is what I want to argue. But I'm biased, and other people may be more capable than I am to see a different way, and I wish I could see things their way, if it exists.

I want to say that legitimacy itself makes things legitimate -- so then, how does legitimacy exist? It has to be able to make things what they are, put the legitimacy in them. It seemingly has to value things, to see them as they are, as they ought to be. To fuse both making and valuing into one act: to see something as such, an opinion so strong it is flesh.

So where Rawlette locates legitimacy in qualia, I would locate it in a person. Both can be said to be made out of consciousness, but there is a difference between the two. -----

pp. 117 - 124 *The advantages of analytic descriptivism*

Rawlette evaluates her analytic descriptivism by the four criteria for a robust realism given in Chapter 2. She thinks that it passes the tests.

Ch. 5

pp. 125 - 127 intro

Rawlette wants to go from pro tanto goodness / badness to goodness / badness all-things-considered. She thinks that the way to do this is to add up the value from each quale of goodness occasioned by an action and then subtract the value from each quale of badness.

pp. 127 - 139 *Are others' qualia normative for me?*

Rawlette says that others' qualia are normative for one, because they "present as having agent-neutral value" and "they do not contain any reference to any particular action or agent."

pp. 128 - 131 (subsection) *1. Positive arguments*

Rawlette says that when we experience pain, we do not think it is only for us to avoid it, that gives no one else a reason to help us. Similarly with pleasure. She claims that normative qualia are "ought-to-be-ness" or "ought-not-to-be-ness" and do not prescribe in themselves a way to alleviate or promote them, nor on whom it is incumbent to act to alleviate or promote them.

pp. 131 - 134 (subsection) *2. Objections*

Rawlette considers and rejects reasons internalism as an objection to her theory.

pp. 134 - 139

Rawlette uses Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* to support an argument that says that subjects do not really exist, at least not absolutely enough to say that a quale could only be what it is for one subject.

p. 139 (subsection) *4. Conclusion*

Rawlette gives a practical reason for ignoring most normative qualia (we are more effective in doing the good that we can if we do so)

pp. 140 - 142 *Are goodness and badness additive?*

Rawlette says normative qualia are additive because they are concrete, and thus add up like other concrete things.

pp. 142 - 143 (subsection) *1. Parfit's alternative proposal*

Rawlette discusses Derek Parfit's rejection of the Impersonal Total Principle ("If other things are equal, the best outcome is the one in which there would be the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living.")

pp. 143 - 145 (subsection) *2. Against Parfit's proposal*

Rawlette discusses "intrinsic good", highlighting its difference from instrumental and extrinsic good. Also from goods whose value depend on the existence of a separate moral fact.

She claims that purely intrinsic goods can't have diminishing marginal utility because there would have to be some higher good that could measure them as diminishing. (My understanding: So if something is of diminishing marginal value, we normally say it's worth less relative to something else. If there were only one good thing to be maximized, there could be only one kind of marginal value, one to one with each unit of "good thing" added.)

----- Sidebar: p. 144:

--However, the model of changing marginal value does not work for one class of goods: *purely intrinsic goods*. This is because, in order for the marginal value of a good to fall (or rise), some of its value must be understood in terms of the value of some other good.--

So what if the qualia of goodness and badness are just one of a number of different intrinsic goods? -----

pp. 145 - 149 (subsection) *3. Objections to additivity*

Rawlette considers and rejects the possibility of there really being multiple intrinsic values (anything in addition to normative qualia).

She considers and rejects Parfit's claim that happiness can be of diminishing marginal value to a world but not to an individual.

----- Sidebar: p. 147 --Parfit *has* to distinguish between value to an individual and value to a world because, while in order to avoid the Repugnant Conclusion, he wants lives after a certain quantity to stop adding value to a world, he obviously can't deny that every extra life worth living is at least valuable to the person living it.--

Perhaps one of the intrinsic goods that compete with normative qualia are persons themselves. In that case, there could be an "Even More Repugnant Conclusion", which says that persons are of inestimable value, because they will prolong lives that aren't even worth living. So then, depending on the exchange rates between "persons" and "lives worth living", we might feel compelled to consider morally best a world with even more people than that of the Repugnant conclusion, in which people have lives that aren't even worth living, but which they must continue in order to continue themselves. -----

pp. 149 - 153 (subsection) *5. [sic] Concluding argument*

Rawlette claims that it is the intrinsic qualitative nature of normative qualia which give a reason to act. Therefore we can't prefer average utilitarianism (we would claim that each unit of happiness in the "Repugnant" world is worth less than in the "nice" world), nor can we endorse concerns of equality that contradict total utilitarianism. She considers and rejects the possibility of the Repugnant Conclusion being something we could practically implement. She claims that we find "Repugnant" worlds distasteful because we feel sympathy for the individuals who would live in them, but this does not affect the math adding up normative qualia to form an overall quantity of good or bad.

----- Sidebar: Normative uncertainty and moral realism combined: there is an absolute and exact exchange rate, down to the finest detail. Everything thinkable thing has some exact absolute value and exchange rate with all other thinkable things. However, we don't know what this is, only God

knows this. The nature of God gives us a broad idea what values he would put on things. Beyond that, it's up to us to learn his will through our own lives. So human governments should promote that process, consider that their "utility function". -----

pp. 153 - 158 *Practical questions*

Rawlette offers some solutions to problems in measuring and comparing normative qualia.

pp. 158 - 159 *Conclusion*

Rawlette summarizes the chapter.

pp. 163 - 165 *Introduction to Part III*

Rawlette introduces chapters 6 and 7.

Ch. 6

pp. 167 - 171 intro

Chapter six is introduced. Rawlette will attempt to show that hedonic utilitarianism is not in conflict with our moral intuition, in the cases that we actually confront (as opposed to hypothetical ones used in thought experiments).

pp. 171 - 173 *Act utilitarianism versus rule utilitarianism*

Rawlette affirms act utilitarianism and rejects rule utilitarianism.

pp. 173 - 176 *Preliminaries about the utility-maximizing decision procedure*

Rawlette considers what she calls "Straightforward Utilitarian Decision Procedure" (know everything, add up all possible consequences to all possible actions, choose the utility-maximizing one) and says that this is impractical, but that there can be other decision procedures which are simpler and which do maximize utility, which recommend exactly what the Straightforward UDP would.

pp. 176 - 178 *First general feature of actual situations: Uncertainty*

Because we don't have perfect information, we have to guess what is the best way to go, based on previous experience. Rawlette cites Gerd Gigerenzer's *Gut Feelings: the Intelligence of the Unconscious* as a source of a decision procedure that does not require having a lot of evidence / past experience (consider one relevant variable for which you have a lot of data, because adding variables shrinks your sample size, making you more vulnerable to random effects).

pp. 178 - 184 *Second general feature of actual situations: Need for coordination*

Promises are a good way to help coordinate behavior. But Straightforward UDP does not allow promises to be formed. Rawlette offers a modification of Straightforward UDP which does allow promises to be kept (in cases where you're unsure if keeping a promise is utilitous, err on the side of keeping it). Deviating from Straightforward UDP can further utility (can fulfill Straightforward UDP's goal).

pp. 184 - 189 *Third general feature of actual situations: Motivational limitations*

People tend to find it hard to motivate themselves to increase utility unless they (or those they care about) can reap the benefits of their work toward it. So it's best to let people have some kind of property (literal or figurative) which is protected from interference from others (thus, "rights"). People will tend to let their selfish bias override the more utilitous, other-favoring decisions, unless they have principles ingrained into them beforehand, of how to act in certain circumstances. What this (and the previous two sections) suggest is that we have rules and rights which we only violate (according to the dictates of something like Straightforward UDP) in exceptional circumstances -- which Rawlette points out is the way ordinary morality seems to work.

pp. 189 - 194 *Applying this decision procedure to Transplant cases*

Rawlette considers thought experiments in which it is supposed beneficial to sacrifice one healthy person to be able to transplant their organs in multiple people in need of a transplant, and finds it not recommended by her decision procedure.

pp. 195 - 197 *The probability of destroying useful expectations*

Rawlette continues her discussion of Transplant cases, specifically whether knowledge of one disturbing transplant can significantly damage people's expectations.

pp. 197 - 200 *Conclusion*

Rawlette discusses other anti-utilitarian thought experiments besides Transplant cases, still concluding that utilitarianism is viable, for reasons given earlier in the chapter.

Ch. 7

pp. 201 - 204 intro

Rawlette discusses the fact that there is a history of discussing and also rejecting hedonism, and identifies Robert Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment as the prime obstacle to people accepting hedonism.

pp. 204 - 208 *Pleasure and pain as indicators*

Pleasure and pain are indicators of reality. In the long run, we experience more pleasure and less pain if we respond to reality.

----- Sidebar: Moral anti-realism says "there is no real morality, but rather what humans feel like, but we feel like acting like there is real morality, and in practice we make ourselves act like there is morality instead of it just being what people feel like." Hedonism either says "human beings have no value except as sources of pleasure" or it says "technically the foundation of morality is that humans have no value except as sources of pleasure, but in the moment I will value you as a person, because after all, that produces more pleasure in the long run". Hedonism is a kind of anti-realism about people-as-ends ["people-as-ends" as opposed to "people-as-means-to-another-end"]. Both hedonists and moral anti-realists act as though it is really right that people be ends, but their actual ontologistic worldview undermines that, but they ignore that in the ordinaristic moment. -----

> I think that what moral anti-realists mean by "moral anti-realism" is often not how I characterize it here (my two points of reference for "moral anti-realism" are Rawlette's critical perspective and Lukas Gloor's different sympathetic perspective, which I encountered after reading Rawlette). It sort of seems from a distance that anti-realism must really be about saying "We have desires, so let's act on them" but turning around and feeling them to be truly moral in the moment. For the sake of these notes, we can say that moral anti-realists effectively do make this move. Hedonists, then, are parallelly anti-realist about intrinsic value of people. (Probably many wouldn't characterize themselves this way, like with moral anti-realists.)

pp. 208 - 213 *Why the experience machine is a bad idea*

Rawlette gives hedonistic reasons to reject the Experience Machine. It is impractical and dangerous to cut yourself off from reality. If it is safe, we would have to have very good computers take care of us.

Also, if we found ourselves in a 100% safe world for using the Machine, there would be no point to being in touch with reality, so we would be so bored we might as well use it.

----- Sidebar: The Experience Machine is not technically a purely solipsistic experience because it is the Speaker who speaks whatever experiences we have to us. Unless we cease to exist in the Experience Machine -- the Machine overrides even our own agency. At worst the Experience Machine is a dream or drug that puts us in bondage -- yet, God is still present in dreams and drugs. God will not allow those dreams or drugs to go on

literally forever, because we need to grow up, become and be ourselves. If hedonism overrides our ability to make meaningful choices, it is a bad by erasing or captivating our personhood. -----

> "The Speaker" is a simantist name for God. That captivation could be a serious problem, if it trains people to trust curated experience and not God, to the extent of leading to hardening.

pp. 214 - 216 *Our valuing something vs. its having objective value*

Rawlette argues that perceptions of value or disvalue, as applied to objects, are not as reliable as the perception that the normative qualia themselves (as perceptions) are valuable or disvaluable.

----- Sidebar: p. 216 --Nozick probably means to rely on something's *seeming* valuable (and thus provoking desire) as *prima facie* evidence for its actually *being* valuable. This would be fine if something's being valuable was always reducible to facts about our perception of it (in the case with the intrinsic goodness and badness of phenomenal qualities). But if the value of being connected to the real world is supposed to be independent of any perception of ours, then our perception's being *evidence* for its value must be established by evidence of a correlation between our perceptions and perception-independent value. That is, we have to have some perception-independent method of determining which things are valuable to confirm the reliability of our perceptions of value. I'm very pessimistic about the possibility of finding such a method, and that's why I endorse the view that the only thing intrinsically normative is phenomenology itself, the intrinsic qualities of which are identical to the qualities we experience them as having.--

We could look at intuition as being a form of perception of some kind of noetic reality. Arguably, this is why we get into metaethics in the first place (Rawlette seems to point to this on p. 3: "The version of realism I present actually provides a robust metaethical justification for many of our strongest moral convictions." Who cares about moral convictions unless they might point to some kind of reality?[)] So while it may be the case that qualia of goodness and badness have a particularly strong case to be made for their actual goodness and badness, if we blinded ourselves to all other normative intuitions, we might be worse off epistemically, possess a more misleading worldview. -----

----- Sidebar: What establishes whether it is right that a thing give rise to a normative quale? Can her metaethics help us there? What establishes that it's valid for a quale to be taken as the quality it communicates? For instance, why should the yellow of a rose be yellowness itself? Why should we take it so if it is? -----

pp. 216 - 220 *Why taking something to be intrinsically valuable could be*

instrumentally valuable

Rawlette gives reasons why it could be useful from a hedonistic point of view to see things as having intrinsic value.

Feeling of Value, Ch. 7 con't

pp. 220 - 224 *Human pleasure vs. animal pleasure*

Rawlette claims that her view elevates the status of animals (because their pleasure is no better or worse than ours), but gives practical reasons why a human life might be instrumentally more valuable than a given animal's life.

----- Sidebar: I find pain unbearable, and pleasure attractive. But I don't think I have a moral responsibility to not experience pain, or to experience pleasure. I will happen to reduce the most unbearable pain, and will find it easy to experience pleasure. If I choose to not maximize my pleasure or my pain, should I be forced to, to maximize value?

Maybe Rawlette ought to press "ought-to-be-ness" instead of pleasure on me. Is ought-to-be-ness something I have a moral obligation to seek in my own life? I could knowingly forego ought-to-be-ness. Somehow hedonism/ normative-qualia-ism has to go from "ought-to-be-ness feels like it ought to be" to "we are morally required to make people feel ought-to-be-ness, and they are morally required to be made to have such". -----

> Should ethics be a recommendation, "Here is the truth, use it if you want"? Or a requirement? I think people nowadays approach it as something in between.

----- Sidebar: Non-human animals certainly seem to have attractive and unbearable experiences, but do they really experience ought-to-be-ness and ought-not-to-be-ness? We may have a moral responsibility to not cause animals unbearability, but this isn't necessarily because unbearability is an instantiation of ought-not-to-be-ness. -----

p. 224 *Conclusion*

Summary of the chapter.

Conclusion

p. 225

Quick wrap-up of the whole book.

Labels: #book review, #metaethics

Bridge Between Rawlette and Moynihan

%bridge-between-rawlette-and-moynihan

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

The following are excerpts from notes that I wrote while reading X-Risk by Thomas Moynihan, which have a lot to do with Rawlette's project as well. So I split them off into this file, to be somewhere between both projects.

Perhaps later in the book [this was written after reading up to p. 95 of *X-Risk*], Moynihan will propose moral realism. I can offer a theistic moral realism, but he wouldn't offer that. He might like Rawlette's. Does hers successfully motivate a person to take responsibility for the extension of value? At least, should it motivate people inclining to civilization-scale nihilism?

I can see Rawlette perhaps making the case that value and disvalue are reliably found in the phenomenology of goodness and badness. Whether we have any duty to maximize them, though, as opposed to a reason to prefer them, I don't know.

On further thought, I think that Rawlette's moral realism would convince some unconvinced people to care about X-risk, on the basis of reason. But it does not argue for one of its important foundations, which is: how is it that a person has any moral accountability to external reality? In simantist terms, why do I have any moral accountability to what is not-me? Not-me including "I need to respond to pain or pleasure" or "I need to respond to threats to my survival" or "Reality all adds up, so I need to do math -- aggregation -- to be moral" or "I need to actually look at my present state of affairs and projected future states of affairs and compare them, bringing myself into them". I am relating to the not-me things of: pain, pleasure, survival, possibility of death, external reality in general, aggregation, present situation, future possibilities. Do I *have to* relate to those things? [For the sake of this paragraph, I'll call them "the List".] Why should I, if I don't want to? This is a hard problem, one which I think even God can't solve without overriding human free will. But just as Rawlette's theory makes inroads on the problem, I think a theistic moral realism can make further inroads by saying that ought itself is real, has ontological grounding as one of God's limbs, as it were, one of his opinions. If we compare tradition, caprice, tyranny, preaching, or even the tyranny of the nature of pain and pleasure, or even badness and goodness themselves, which are the things to which we must give up our freedom on a secular

account, and on the other hand an unshaming God who suffers the same degradations we do, then I can see that some people would be motivated to trust the foundational concepts (or, simantic words) that lead to morality, mentioned above [i.e., the List], who wouldn't by the best secular metaethics. And where secular metaethics tends to (maybe not in the case of Rawlette, I'm not sure) say "hey, if every human on earth wants to slack off and call it an existence and let things run down" [then that's fine], theistic metaethics says "The collective opinion of the human race is not the only one that matters, and we need to do our best, whatever that cashes out to be as theists".

This last point raises a question: what is the theistic take on X-risk?

[I should probably write a longer post on this (I did), but basically, the MSLN take might be "For some reason (certainly this is biblical), God works through, may even have to work through, evolving civilization. Our civilization, believe it or not, is better from his perspective in some important way than the past. Maybe we are getting close to the world in which hardening is minimized. So to throw all of that away to try to start fresh could be costly from his perspective, and so we should value our own civilization and make it more something that minimizes hardening.]

Some people can at least ask "Should I take aggregation, pain, pleasure, etc. seriously?" If they can still ask this question, they are still concerned about "should" or "ought" of some sort. A case can [or might] be made that God is true ought, that all that is is ought, that what ought to be is, and that what ought not to be is the clash between two things that ought to be. And this ought that could be taken to [be] being above God is God himself. If we are interested in reality outside ourselves, we can come by reasonable ideas about the nature of God, and these inform our metaethics. [Any real should, including the should in "Should I take aggregation, pain, pleasure, etc. seriously?" (which is "What is to be done, according to should"), must be in tune with God, who can be partially known.] This might be an inroad on nihilism, waking up people if they have the barest connection to should. [To claim that ought fundamentally is, the evidence coming from the called-for-ness of asking the "should?" question.] If it is possible to be rational at all, "should" is involved, and thus excellence is called for apart from human judgment.

A person comes to value their life because they choose to live in the face of unbearable experiences. Once they value their life, they come to value what furthers their life and this includes reason. If God exists (one who lives in the face of much greater unbearability than any one human), then there exists a being who cares more than we do, even if some future human race drops out of concern with reality. If this dropping out is because we will have all rejected God, and thus desire to have no responsibility to him, if reality should require it of us, then he may leave us in our hardenedness, before destroying us. But if our nihilism is not an

expression of our enmity with God, he will restore us somehow, perhaps with a healthy dose of unbearability, to challenge us to exist, or reach into our personal beings directly to change us, so that we can begin to relate to him and other beings in a deep way once again.

Labels: #book review, #civilization, #metaethics, #note

Guilt is When We Look Bad

%guilt-is-when-we-look-bad

Friday, April 9, 2021

Guilt and shame are when we look bad to ourselves, when we feel like (see ourselves such that) we deserve to look bad to ourselves. Maybe God (truth and legitimacy) agrees, maybe not. But God loves us more than we do, or than other people love us. You can ask yourself, when guilty or ashamed "Does God care about this? Or is this my idea, or other people's idea?" Sometimes you do the wrong thing, and it really is wrong. But what do you think God thinks of it?

Labels: #God, #morality, #note

Belief Different From Trusting

%belief-different-from-trusting

Saturday, April 10, 2021

Adopting the official intellectual beliefs that God loves you, is trustworthy, and will take care of you does not necessarily mean that you trust him.

Labels: #note

The Process of Maturity, Salted With Fire

%the-process-of-maturity-salted-with-fire

Tuesday, April 13, 2021

Mark 9:

> 47 If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out. It is better for you to enter into God's Kingdom with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into the Gehenna of fire, 48 'where their worm doesn't die, and the fire is not quenched.' 49 For everyone will be salted with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. 50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, with what will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

Sometimes it can seem like the world is mostly divided between flippant, irresponsible jerks who seek conflict, and overly-responsible, sad, hopeless people who do not. One can see why society would prefer the latter over the former, and it's natural for people to drift into the latter category over time. We get beaten down by life, broken, and come out, not with new wisdom, but with the inability to cause trouble. But this can be taken for wisdom.

Liberalism is about taking what's messed up about people and using it to disable them so that they can live in harmony. It assumes that you can't have the really good thing, not reliably, so you have to get people using a messed-up substitute that's more effective in the here-and-now. A liberal thing to do would be to break people's youthful pride (and their self-respect, their hope, their true personhood) through some kind of process of exposing them to things that overwhelm them and break them down. I don't think anyone consciously designed the process of maturity in our culture, but it almost seems like the kind of thing designed by a liberal theorist to keep people effectively docile (no matter how sad they might get over the status quo). Let people go off into the wilderness without education and support, and let them lose their taste for seeing things for themselves. Then they can be nominally free, free to speak, write, assemble, etc., while "magically" not using that freedom to attack the state or set up a rival to the secular order.

Yet, Jesus sees value in "fiery salt" keeping us living at peace with each other, and Jesus does not seem like the kind of person who would want us

to end up mutilated or debased for the sake of peace. Salt is a good thing in Jesus' point of view. So can we distinguish between Jesus' salt and our culture's alternative to salt?

One possible difference is courage. Neither flippant, irresponsible jerks nor overly-responsible, sad, hopeless people have courage in a defining way. In general, we know things through their fruits. So what is the fruit, in you and your life, of the "brokenness-wisdom" (or the thing that could be mistaken as brokenness-wisdom)?

It's possible that what makes something salt is how things turns out. If you are broken but then go on to be fertile, then the fire became salt. (For the sake of the metaphor, salt is something that preserves and flavors.)

The secular order is not all bad, and Jesus didn't come to set up a kingdom on earth to replace it. The fear of religiosity that political people had in setting up liberalism does not have to be borne out. Religion does not have to be the cause or excuse of war, even ardent religion that puts God ahead of political, cultural, human-based things-to-be-trusted or objects of allegiance. So there doesn't have to be an overt conflict between Christianity and a this-worldly social and political order, and to an extent, there can't be for Christianity to really be true to the prince of peace. Perhaps Christianity can only be allowed to be supreme in the unofficial, non-established culture when it learns to not use any kind of coercion to establish itself, leaving coercion in the hands of the secular government.

But having said all that, the secular culture that liberalism helped set up does mire some people in hopelessness and discouragement, and turns people away from loving God. There is work to be done to combat the damage done to us either by liberalism, or some less-intentional, evolved culture of maturing. Culture is not just what we say, but also how we live and what happens to us. We each have a part to play in how maturing works in our society, and if maturing worked better, we would be better able to seek God, and better able to make society better.

How can we help people mature? It's good to respect younger people. Also, it is good to not tempt young people, but rather to anti-tempt them.

Labels: #education, #Jesus, #liberalism, #life lessons, #maturity

Pathological Thoughts and Emotions; Seeing the Truth

%pathological-thoughts-and-emotions

Thursday, April 15, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional. Practical suggestions somewhat tested.

Two big functions of emotions: 1. motivation to do something that needs to be done, 2. bearing witness to truth. There may be other functions, but these two stand out to me right now.

If an emotion is neither practical nor truthful, it may be pathological. For instance, perhaps you feel pain over some past event (a trauma or a death). A certain amount of pain motivates you (to get out of a relationship or to seek new relationships, for instance). A certain amount bears witness to the truth -- you really were wronged, or someone who you know was really valuable is no longer with you. But beyond that, the pain is pathological.

How can you tell when a negative (or positive) emotion has crossed from truthful into pathological? One possible criterion is: does it keep you from doing what is necessary, in parts of your life more, or less, related to the emotion? Another is: does it keep you from intellectually or emotionally bearing witness to the truth? It may be possible to have a vivid pathological emotion toward a reality, which prevents you from having the one that bears witness to the truth. For instance, to be sentimental over a person rather than respectful, or triggered rather than receptive. Or, a pathological emotion can keep you from having the intellectual bearing-of-witness to a truth, perhaps in a different part of life. Truth is much bigger than just one truth. Given the complexity of truth, it may be hard to determine that a given emotion is not at all pathological, but you can more easily tell when it has definitely become significantly pathological.

There are far too many truths to bear witness to each of them, but the overall truth may be known, of all of reality, or sometimes of a society, life in general, or a person; and if a society never bears witness to a particular truth, that truth will be ignored, possibly preventing something of practical value to humans. Some truths are distant and we can have little responsibility for them, while others are things we see all the time, or have seen recently.

An emotion can fulfill one or both of the functions of motivation and truth in the area where it directly applies, but also interfere with a necessary

action or bearing-of-witness to truth in another area, and thus be pathological.

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Given what is written above, thoughts are in much the same situation as emotions. Thoughts can: 1. motivate necessary action; 2. bear witness to a truth. And there may be other functions that don't immediately come to my mind. Otherwise, thoughts are pathological. And one way to identify a pathological as opposed to truthful thought is one that interferes with motivating necessary actions, or which interferes with bearing witness to another truth. Like with emotions, it's hard to be sure a thought is not distracting from all other truths which might be more necessary to contemplate than it, but sometimes it's not so hard to identify a thought that keeps you from thinking another specific truth that is more necessary. A thought can fulfill legitimate functions but be pathological for interfering with the action or bearing-of-witness in other areas.

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It may be more often useful to think in terms of "what practical steps or overall truths, or relevant particular truths, am I missing?" rather than "which of my thoughts and emotions are pathological?" If you are more successful with the first issue, the second is less relevant.

You can't get the overall truth of a formulaless being (such as a human being or God) by no matter how extensive a dissection. It can be helpful to meditate on people's qualities, but not necessary to figure out what makes them tick, in order to get their overall truth. In fact, being overly concerned with the mechanism risks getting lost in the poetry of something rather than its reality.

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This all could be seen as a kind of therapy, and pursuing it can have a therapeutic effect. But the drive to therapy itself can be a pathological thought pattern (an obsession over health and well-being). So it is good to focus on truth and usefulness, more so than therapy, even if the outcome is therapeutic. (The therapeutic could be seen as a form of what is useful.)

Thinking and feeling (as well as sense perception) can be part of "seeing". Seeing a thing to see its truth is different than seeing it for the sake of personal self-interest, usefulness, place within some kind of lawyerly case, or enjoyment. The seeing itself is different.

Mindfulness has something to do with seeing the truth of something, but isn't necessarily the same. Mindfulness may or may not be pursued simply to see the truth of things, and I'm not sure from my limited knowledge of it whether mindfulness has as broad a scope as seeing the truth of

something.

Literary poems (by one definition) use words to try to create an intuitive whole, and can bring up just about anything in the process. Seeing the truth of something can work the same way. A literary poem may try to accomplish something, have an agenda, but seeing the truth does not, beyond seeing the truth. A literary poem uses words, but seeing the truth of something doesn't have to. What is important is, in one whole, to think, feel, experience, but also intuit, in order to experience the truth of something. This can be seen as really listening to a simantic word, on the "face" or "side" of it that you have experienced.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #mental health, #pragmatism, #truth

Tying Shoes

%tying-shoes

Thursday, April 15, 2021

Is it possible to overcome a sinful habit or negative psychological tendency? (The two can be hard to tell apart sometimes.) The question might seem dangerous. What if you think you have, but you haven't? Are humans capable of perfection?

I think, sometimes, and in a limited sense, we are. Most adults are really, really good at tying their shoes (at least in America, or I would assume any other country where shoes with shoelaces are common). They consistently tie their shoes day after day without messing up. It really isn't a very interesting subject, and they hardly mention it. True, it's possible that on some particular day, they might not tie their shoes quite right. They aren't quite perfect. But they approach perfection so closely that for most purposes, they are perfect. This situation does not obtain for children when they are young enough, though. But eventually they learn how to be for-most-practical-purposes-perfect shoelace-tiers. And adults who really know how to tie their own shoes are generally the ones who teach those children the basics.

It's not wise to think you're 100% safe from temptation. But it is okay to be unconscious of whether you're sinful much of the time, and at some point in your life, perhaps, to be free enough from sin that the subject need concern you no more than tying your shoes.

Unconsciousness helps you in both shoe-tying and overcoming sin. If your sins are small, and are infrequent enough, your thoughts and care are better directed toward areas that are more at play. And if you think really hard about some habitual action, if you are self-conscious in performing it, you often are more likely to mess it up, or to get so stressed out you mess up other things. Being able to not be interested in yourself, either as a good or a bad person, is a good thing, and getting into a mindless habit of doing the right thing and not doing the wrong thing is a way to achieve that, in part. You only need to pay attention to yourself when you need to change something. Otherwise you are free to not think about yourself.

(It's good at this point to consider if your thoughts and feelings of guilt perhaps go beyond their functions of truth and motivation and are becoming pathological.)

I haven't helped a child learn how to tie shoes, but I can imagine that you sort of move their hands the way they should move and maybe try to explain what to do, and then encourage them as they keep trying. If they

ask for help, help them, but still expect them to do the work themselves, because they have to do it. As a parent, you want them to tie their shoes, without them despairing of the task. So you don't want to shut them down in their shoe-tying (by being harsh, for instance), but you also want to make sure they learn. Perhaps you can teach yourself, or someone else, to not sin in a similar way.

Maybe this is a criterion for helping others overcome their sinful habits: If there's a sin that is as uninteresting to you as shoe-tying, and when you see it in someone in an uninteresting way, the way you see the kind of facts nobody argues about, and you can do so respectfully, then you can help. Jesus says that those without beams in their eyes can take specks out of others' eyes (Matthew 7:5). Maybe you really don't have a beam and you really can help with a speck.

God is our father and will help us learn how to tie our shoes. We can pray and expect help from him (the way children expect help when they ask for it). Like a parent, he leaves us to our own devices sometimes so that we can learn things for ourselves.

God can simply fill us with his spirit, so that we do not sin. This is probably the most effective way for us to overcome our sinful habits. But this does not happen to all of us right now. Arguably, if God wanted to end all sin right now, he could, by filling us all with the Holy Spirit. But he doesn't. I assume, because the real point of existence is our own response to him, not what he puts into us. So we go many years without being filled with the Spirit, and we still have to love God anyway, and try, difficult or impossible as it is, to overcome our sinful habits.

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Is tying the shoes the point (is overcoming sinful / unhealthy habits the point), or is loving God the point? We want children to get over obnoxious habits, ones which would anger us if adults persisted in them. Our adult children need to not have them anymore. The situation needs to be like shoe-tying. Sinful attitudes, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, etc. are violations of legitimacy, that is, God himself and they really matter in themselves.

But suppose a parent had a child-teaching robot that cost $20,000, which would teach their children all the skills they needed, far more efficiently than by the old method where the children would ask for help from the parent. Would the children love the parent? Imagine a child crying out as they struggle to learn a serious lesson (maybe something that will look as trivial as shoe-tying in just a few years -- or maybe something the memory of which will always have some weight). A child and a parent can really grow close during such cryings-out, and comfortings. So would it be wise to buy that very-effective child-teaching robot? Would you buy it, if you

were a parent? In our society, you might. But if you were counter-cultural, you might not.

I am a bit unsure what to say of such analogs to child-teaching robots as psychotherapy, meditation, economic prosperity, secular education, and so on. God did pay a generous "$20,000" for each of those things -- God who can then be distant to us, a name on a check. I certainly don't want to say that people should never trust those kinds of things. I do myself (for whatever that's worth), to some extent. But it would be sad if we never really grew close to God, for all that our lives were blessed.

This closeness with God could come through a crying-out to help us overcome a sinful habit. In our culture, where sin is often not talked about, we cry out to God for anything but that. We go long years crying out and not getting useful and desirable maturity. We wish we were not plagued by psychological ill-health. And when the ill-health is finally alleviated, we find it easy (or easier) to not act out -- for us to set aside our sinful habits. God can be close to us as we wait through those long years -- or, he can not be, or can not be to as great an extent as he would have if we were open to that or conscious of that.

There's an analog to the story of Job, an alternative where Job, instead of realizing he wants to meet God after everything is taken away from him, begins the story by wanting to meet God, and then God takes everything away, and then Job really is motivated to demand God's presence. Would you want to live that story? Again, in our society, you might not, but if you were counter-cultural, you might.

Labels: #civilization, #God, #holiness, #Holy Spirit, #mental health, #morality, #overcoming sin

Descriptive and Practical Epistemology

%descriptive-and-practical-epistemology

Friday, April 16, 2021

What is epistemology? How we know things? Well, what do we know? I know that I exist and that there is something that is not me, and I know what that not-me looks like, sounds like, etc. -- sense perception -- as well as what I perceive of it noetically. I am a subject experiencing the moment. I don't really know what lies outside the moment, and I can be led to doubt the existence of what is outside myself and the moment.

But I know that I know these things. I'm confident of it.

Everything else, I'm not confident of. But I still believe things I'm not 100% sure of. I have learned that it is better for me to do that.

For the things that we know we know, we have a solid example of knowledge, and then we can do descriptive epistemology to describe the knowing of the things, and learn something about knowledge.

For the things that we want to figure out whether to believe, we need to do practical epistemology. This shows us how to act and trust, in the absence of perfect knowledge.

There should be some connection between descriptive and practical epistemology.

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Interestingly enough, I am seemingly very confident that I can at least begin to know things. I can definitely try to. This is part of descriptive epistemology's domain. For it to even make sense to doubt something, some things have to be true. I know that I can try to pursue practical epistemology, and some things have to be true for that to be possible. These can also be added to descriptive epistemology's domain. Maybe other things can. So I may try to put more thought into figuring out the boundary between epistemic and practical epistemology.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #trust

Fiducialist Epistemology

%fiducialist-epistemology

Friday, April 16, 2021

In fiducialism, it is important for us to trust more and more. A reason that could be given for this (which is at least basically stated in this booklet) is that personal being itself is trust. Personal beings are persons experiencing, and all personal experience is a trusting of reality. It could be said that all that exists are personal beings experiencing, which is trust, and thus that all that exists is trust. I wouldn't tie being (the act of being, existence) down to one definition too readily, but we could say that at least from one angle, being is trust.

If we accept this idea, then in order to be, trust is always what comes first, and we only restrict trust in order to keep from being betrayed. In that case, to the extent that we have a choice, we should believe everything, unless there is a reason not to (a defeater). Believing a proposition is a form of trusting it, so all propositions should be believed by default. Defeaters, from a fiducialist point of view, are things which inhibit trust. Trust can be inhibited by betrayal, dulling, quenching, or "easing", or perhaps other mechanisms. The rule could be "don't believe things that lead to betrayal, dulling, quenching, or 'easing', or other inhibitors of trust." Also, don't believe things that inhibit other people's trust, even if they are a form of you trusting, since their trust matters as well.

This could be (at least the beginnings of) a basic fiducialist epistemology. Actually applying this theory would take more thought than is given here, but at least we can see this as biasing us toward trusting, in our practical epistemology.

Labels: #epistemology, #note, #ontology, #trust

The Actual Truth is Hard to Believe

%the-actual-truth-we-could-say-is-set-of

Saturday, April 17, 2021

The actual truth, we could say, is the set of beliefs that actually get us to do what needs to get done and bears witness to reality. (It is non-pathological.) It will bring about the best possible world, if we all believe it, because it's actually true, and thus can guide us to true well-being, in a way that belief-sets that are not actually true cannot. The actual truth always unites, because it takes into account all the important aspects of reality. It is not the truth that a partisan would believe, who didn't care about anybody outside his or her party. It is the belief-set that acknowledges all valid human values, and if it must invalidate any values, it does so validly. It is a judge that all can respect, and by respecting its inherent legitimacy, find that even its painful or challenging judgments are just and satisfying.

However, as desirable as the actual truth might sound, it's hard to believe. It's conceivable that that's because there is no actual truth, and it could be difficult to show that the actual truth is true, if it does exist. But even if that difficulty can be surmounted, it may still be hard to believe the actual truth, for social reasons. It is the case that it is far more likely for people to believe approximations of the actual truth, different ones, and form communities around those approximations, which then may be in conflict with other communities with their approximations. Within each partisan community, it is easy to believe the one truth shared within it, without considering outsiders' points of view. From this it is possible to go to physical or cultural war, exhausting people. One solution to the conflict that ensues is to stop caring about the truth. That way people can all think the same way, by assenting to yet another approximation of the actual truth, one of compromise. Either by "siloing" in attractive tribal approximations, or constructing a popular consensus approximation, people do not seek the actual truth.

There is the actual truth, which is right and true because it is what is actual truth, valuable like a star by which we can travel for millions of years, and then there are smaller truths, which seem far more important to us because the fit around us on earth, where we live the lives that we think are so important. We might say that we urgently need certain small truths to survive. Some of them may be necessary to even consider traveling by starlight. Maybe this is true. It is possible that there are small

truths which can only be known if we seek the actual truth. Perhaps ones which can only be known if we find the actual truth.

So, difficult as seeking the actual truth is, it is a desirable and necessary thing. It does not deserve to be unpopular.

Labels: #note, #politics, #truth

Believing Culturally

%believing-culturally

Saturday, April 17, 2021

31 May 2021: minor edit.

The Christianity of MSLN includes in it a recognition of the value of non-Christian religions, as well as other doctrinal cultures of Christianity. A religion, in all its complexity and extensiveness, is all one simantic word, and is spoken by God. To the extent that it does not conflict with a person's relationship with God (which it might do, for instance, by turning people away from believing in a God who could be a human and die, or by turning people away from obeying the true commands of God, whatever they may be), it is part of God's creation and is trustworthy to those who trust it. So it is possible to practice a non-Christian religion and still be Christian, as long as your primary allegiance is to Jesus as the son of God, and thus ultimately to the Father. It can be practiced and believed in culturally, rather than literally, literal devotion being reserved for the Christian God.

For an example, consider within Christianity. Let us suppose MSLN is correct. It conflicts with all of the already-existing doctrinal cultures on some point or other, just as all of them do with each other. If a Calvinist, seeking the supremacy of Jesus Christ, came to believe that MSLN was really the truth from Jesus, they would have to convert to MSLN (New Wine) Christianity. But they would have their whole lifetime as a Calvinist as part of their spiritual heritage. There's a whole culture shaped by belief in the unshakable and absolute sovereignty of God -- the one so sovereign that he alone decides who is saved and who is damned. They could keep that culture, and could even look on that unshakable and absolutely sovereign God as a poem, an artistic image of God -- not literally correct but beautiful in a way, and something which can teach valuable lessons, as a literary example might. Perhaps they would entertain non-literal belief in such a God, perhaps through a ritual of remembering their heritage.

It could work similarly with converts to MSLN from outside Christianity. They could still read their non-Christian scriptures, and practice the old rituals and even observe the old laws (as long as none of this conflicted with the truth), but as poetry, not as literal.

A child could be raised in any one of different "nations" or people groups. There is a people group for Islam (actually a number of them), ones for Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and so on. There are also many non-religious people groups (atheists, Americans, or even subcultures based

around people's interests, like music fans or users of technologies), etc.). Children can be raised in many different people groups, whatever is part of their parents' heritage, as poetry, but there is only one literal truth, that of legitimacy itself.

I have used MSLN Christianity as an example of what people would convert to, because I'm writing from my perspective, with my hopes, but supposing there was something better, whatever aspires to being the actual truth probably will want to approach converts the same way I do here, or similarly.

Labels: #atheism, #Buddhism, #Christianity, #civilization, #Hinduism, #Islam, #Judaism, #note, #religion

Non-elite Check on Elites re: X-Risk

%non-elite-check-on-elites-re-x-risk

Thursday, April 22, 2021

This is an addendum to my review of *X-Risk*. In it, I mentioned that it would be necessary to provide the general populace with a sufficiently motivating culture if we want to safeguard civilization, because as long as they are in power, they can affect how assiduous we are in avoiding X-risk, and we want them to have power so that an elite doesn't form separate of them and develop an insular culture that leads to the annihilation or oppression of the non-elites.

I wondered today if there were ways we could imagine a lack of democracy not being dangerous for the general populace. One way to make this work is to have the elite mixing with and knowing personally members of the general populace, in a way that all demographics are represented among the people the elite can become close to. However, in the days of legal slavery, slaveowners were physically close to some of their slaves, and also in some ways intimate with them, without abolishing slavery. So maybe that's a count against the idea that people will be automatically attuned to people just by mixing with them.

Perhaps there could be some kind of elite education which is in the hands of the general populace, making sure that the elite are formed by non-elite. It's possible for elites to be like police officers, some forming gangs within the whole. They could pretend to be normal non-elite-respecting people but secretly think otherwise, abetted by their gang culture. But we could hope that the intervention of the vigilant non-elites might be able to prevent this from happening.

If we are going to have a check on elites by non-elites, then the non-elites still need to be on board with whatever goals are really important, such as avoiding X-risk, wireheading, or hardening. Elites may passively absorb non-elite culture, or be held in check by non-elites who are themselves affected by non-elite culture.

Labels: #civilization, #culture, #education, #futurism, #politics

Ethical Epistemology

%ethical-epistemology

Thursday, April 22, 2021

An ethical epistemology is when we act on beliefs for ethical reasons. Our practical epistemology is about our beliefs as measured by actions, so an ethical epistemology is about our beliefs as measured by actions when those actions seek an ethical end. In a sense, "belief" just means "practical belief" (in many contexts it does). So we can believe things ethically, according to ethical commitments. If those ethical commitments change, we will believe differently. And, to an extent, the world will be different in our eyes.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #morality

Emotional Epistemology

%emotional-epistemology

Friday, April 23, 2021

Ethics affects what kinds of emotions we consider valid to feel, how much we listen to them, and on the other hand, the kinds of emotions that we trust affect the ethics that we have. So an input (and output) of ethical epistemologies are emotions. Thus we can say that there's such a thing as emotional epistemology. Believing, practically and epistemically, what follows from emotions.

For instance, we can believe in a hungry and angry way, or in a full and calm way. What is reality? Emotionally, what is hungry and angry can seem to have less "B.S." about it. Can we know things with our emotions? Maybe we can. So a case can be made for the hungry and angry epistemology. On the other hand, maybe we see the truth most clearly when we are not hungry and angry. We can take into account points of view outside whatever hunger and anger we have adopted (or, which has adopted us).

(There are probably other emotional epistemologies besides hungry, angry, full, and calm.)

Labels: #definition, #epistemology

The Tails Come Apart on Trusting

%the-tails-come-apart-on-trusting

Friday, April 23, 2021

Trust is receptivity to enhancement. So if we think that a thing or person, for instance God, is 100% reliable, doesn't that mean we trust that thing or person 100%?

It might sound like we would. But part of trusting something is being awake to it. That's part of receptivity to enhancement. To even consider something as being enhancement is part of what makes it enhancement. On a deeper level, we can't receive the gift of a person unless we value them. So we can't trust them if we don't value them. And we tend to value the things that are contested. So then maybe the tails come apart on trust. An obvious form of trust is to find something safe, but another is to be awake to it, to connect to it, and the two values may exclude each other to some extent if either is maximized. Thus the way to increase trust to the maximum in something (especially obvious with a person) is to not take it for granted, and if we take "not take for granted" literally, we would need to not be assured of it 100%.

People used to care more about the assurance that they were saved, and that God existed. There's an extent to which anxiety over these things inhibits trust in God. So assurance is a good thing -- up to a point. $>90\%$ or even $>99\%$ assurance may be good, but 100% assurance of the existence of God and of one's salvation are things that aren't so clearly good. Using numbers here is a little misleading (are all 99% assurances the same?). So maybe the real point is to not take God for granted, or our own salvation.

In times past, people were more certain that God existed, and less sure that they were saved, but now it is more true that we think that if God exists, we're definitely saved, but God may not exist. In either case, we are kept out of complacency, which is at least partially a good thing. I think that maybe it's okay to be 100% sure that God exists, as long as you are not 100% sure that you are saved, and that's preferable to me than the other way around.

As to belief in God, not being 100% sure of the existence of God can keep you awake to the truth. You keep asking "does the truth say that God exists?" If God is truth, then truth should say that God exists, so you should listen to truth, be open to it on a deeper level. So then it could be good to

not be 100% sure that God exists, so that truth can tell you that he does.

Lack of 100% certainty isn't a good in itself, rather trust is. Insofar as lack of 100% certainty awakens you and teaches you to value, it is a good thing. Uncertainty of a certain kind or degree can cause you to trust less.

The MSLN position on assurance is that until we are completely done with sin, there is some chance that we can get to a state where we hold onto a sin forever, never letting God work it out of us. In this life, we never know if we've reached that state of being done with sin, where no new sins can come to light, and we can never be sure that we are done being tempted, even if we get to some state where it seems like we aren't being tempted anymore. But when we are done with sin, in heaven, then can we have 100% assurance? Maybe, but why? We would have God himself instead.

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I can picture a lot of people living in innocence, rather than presumption, when they take God for granted. Maybe children or child-like people can be forgiven their taking God for granted in that way. But children grow up, and maybe we will all grow up, in this life or in the Millennium, and have to grapple with the fact that we have sins in us, ways in which we are incompatible with God, and as long as we do, there is some risk, small though it may be, that we will commit to those sins more than to him and become hardened.

Also, I can see that people might say "the way to not take God for granted is to be grateful for him and his gifts, rather than to doubt your own salvation". One aspect of trusting someone is listening to them, waiting to hear what they have to say, and valuing what they have already said, responding to it. It's possible to be very grateful to someone and not listen to them. In this case, trust is defective. A person who is uncertain (but not perniciously uncertain) of another person will listen to what they say and take them seriously, and thus trust them. The stance of listening to God, listening to hear if we need to let go of any more idols or sins, is similar to or exactly the same as (a certain kind of) doubting your own salvation. There's nothing wrong with gratitude (certainly it's more trusting than being positively ungrateful), but it doesn't solve the problem of not taking God for granted by itself.

Labels: #God, #Slate Star Codex, #trust

Anger Constitutes Visceral Valuing of Justice

%anger-constitutes-visceral-valuing-of

Friday, April 23, 2021

I've heard it said that anger is a reaction to things not being the way they ought to be. If we suffer injustice in a concrete way, we get angry, and to us, the category of justice becomes more concrete. Those who have not experienced injustice in a concrete way do not viscerally value justice. They might give assent to "justice is good", but they don't really get it.

If this is true (and it may not be the whole story), then those who fight for justice are fighting for a world in which people will be unable to appreciate, on a deeper level, the justice that they have.

Labels: #note, #psychology, #valuing

Humanist and Theist Ethical Epistemologies

%humanist-and-theist-ethical

Sunday, April 25, 2021

One ethical epistemology or class of ethical epistemologies is the humanist, another is the theist. A humanist would say "I will believe what I have to in order to give human beings total fulfillment from their perspective. For instance, make it so there's no pain, just 'gradients of bliss', or whatever it is that makes people happy. Or if humans all want something else, give them that." A theist would say "I will believe what I have to in order to be true to God. I would say 'please God', but what if God doesn't want to be pleased? Everything is for him, pursued as purely and stringently as possible."

Epistemologies seem to need to obey a law: the law of defeaters. Any belief can be defeated (at least in theory). So most humanists do (and all certainly ought to) leave some openness to defeaters to their ethical stance (in this case, whether humanism is really the best), and similarly with theists. What kind of things would be considered valid defeaters? How can you compare one ethical epistemology with another? Is there some way to figure out what value system is objectively correct? If we could do that, we would know which ethical epistemology to follow. But we can't derive that comparing epistemology from an ethical epistemology, if we are trying to know which way is best. So we seem to need some other kind of epistemology, which may be able to decide between them.

On the other hand, we might reason that our ethical stance is some kind of basic belief. It could be a direct perception of truth. But again, somehow there would have to be the possibility of defeaters of that. Otherwise, we might risk selling everything out to something unworthy or unreal, or failing to sell everything out to what really is worthy and real, without having any way to back down from that stance.

Labels: #epistemology, #morality

Survival Epistemology

%survival-epistemology

Sunday, April 25, 2021

There are two practical epistemologies of survival. One is of physical survival. We seek to believe that which will prolong our physical lives as much as possible. Another is of emotional or hedonic survival. We seek to believe that which gives us emotional relief, so that we aren't "underwater". Negative feelings can feel so bad that we feel like we are going to die, even if literally speaking we are not. Because the drive for relief of pain and fear of death, and for not dying, are so deeply rooted in us viscerally, these practical epistemologies are powerful and persuasive a lot of the time.

Labels: #epistemology, #psychology

"The Truth is Unhealthy"

%the-truth-is-unhealthy

Wednesday, April 28, 2021

"The truth is *unhealthy*." I think I read these words somewhere in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* or *The Gay Science*. A quick Internet search does not confirm this, and it doesn't matter enough to me to leaf through my copies of those books to figure out if he really said that or not. I want to give Nietzsche credit in case he deserves it, but the idea is what is more important to me.

What is health? In this post, mostly psychological health. But it can also be "the mindset of living in accordance with wanting to protect and maximize one's own well-being so that one feels good in the moment and doesn't physically die", so, a mindset of self-preservation and subjective happiness.

What is the truth? Maybe it is "human-independent reality". Someone like Sharon Rawlette would want there to be "judgment-independent" reality which can critique our own judgments about what is right and wrong. What matters, regardless of our opinions, might be called the truth.

The truth is that which deserves to be thought about. It is something which we have to conform ourselves to. It sounds a lot like legitimacy. Perhaps it just is legitimacy (as I use the term).

In theory, the truth doesn't care at all about us and our well-being. We need to be open to facts that disregard our well-being, though we are on a quest for well-being. But the truth is not just the definition of a word, but the thing which satisfies that definition. We would expect some possible satisfactions of the definition "truth" could be unhealthy. We certainly shouldn't assume that the truth is healthy. And, what is more true, more purely fulfilling the definition "true", than unhealthiness, which disregards well-being?

There is a sense in which it is best of all if humans could approach reality without being obsessed with their well-beings. To love someone not because they make you feel good, but because they deserve it. Or to love God not because he blesses you but just because he is real and is legitimacy itself. Or to live as though not toiling and hungering under the sun, but as though looking to the stars, which are so small and easy to ignore, but so true. This requires a certain indifference to health. I could consider it to be a worthy goal to live in that "sidereal", "health-indifferent" place.

Nietzsche wrote "Beyond Good and Evil" to (if I recall correctly) posit an

amoral world of good and bad, in place of good and evil. But I would sometimes like to posit a world that is "Beyond Good and Bad Well-being", one which in a sense is only moral (or aesthetic, or personal), without an ounce of "good and bad" or of "healthy and unhealthy".

Perhaps that is what heaven is for those who want that kind of freedom. However, not even God is free from the life reality of well-being as long as any of us are still in it. And much as I like stars, God is more important, and I don't think that well-being is something that God disowns, even in the ideal world. But certainly being free of slavery and idolatry to well-being is necessary if we are to make God first in our hearts.

So in that respect, I can respect a Nietzschean *unhealthy* truth (or a pseudo-Nietzschean one, as the case may be).

However, though well-being matters only to a certain extent, I don't think the truth, the real thing that actually satisfies the definition, is unhealthy. If you seek the truth, you will be healthy in the process, because the whole truth includes God, and simply to contemplate God is to be healed, even apart from any specifically healing work he does in you. God is truth (in the sense of "the opposite of lies and being lie-like"), trustworthiness, and settled goodness. And seeking the truth, even if you don't believe in God, can be therapeutic, to a degree.

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On the other hand, if we define "healthy" as "maximizing well-being as defined by survival epistemology", then if anything threatens the supremacy of survival within us, it is unhealthy, by definition. The very possibility of there being truth, the possibility that there could be something that instantiates "truth" as it is defined, would be something that by definition could possibly turn out to say "disregard your well-being", and that threatens the absolute supremacy of survival. And, as it happens, God, the truth, does threaten survival epistemology.

I am very much torn between wanting to emphasize that God is in fact healthy to believe in and brings health (because I think that's true) and wanting to emphasize that health doesn't really matter in the end and that survival epistemology is very often survival idolatry. Truth is what really matters, that is, being in line with legitimacy, which is the same as God. Health matters to us RIGHT NOW, screams at us that it matters, twists us so that we bow down to it, and perhaps there's not much we can do but do so. Certainly the truth (that which satisfies the definition of truth, God) makes provision for healing us -- sometimes. But at some point, we have to learn to put God first, or else we will suffer a worse fate than anything life on earth threatens. We will lose our connection with reality, and we will lose out on life with God, which is the greatest loss either for those who live to love God or for those who live for their own well-beings.

Labels: #Friedrich Nietzsche, #God, #mental health, #truth

Semi-Inevitable

%semi-inevitable

Friday, April 30, 2021

I was once rebuked for saying that something was inevitable when it wasn't literally inevitable. It was something that prima facie would come to pass, unless something ruled it out. I've heard people using "inevitable" that way. I think we are talking about how future events have a pull to them that feels irresistible. But literally speaking, these events are resistible, at least, they might be for all we actually know in the moment, and we never literally meant to make the claim that they were truly not avoidable. I think there should be a term for this version of "inevitable". So, I propose "semi-inevitable".

Labels: #definition

Love-Oriented and Altruism-Oriented Epistemology

%love-oriented-and-altruism-oriented

Friday, April 30, 2021

One practical epistemology is the one in which we choose to believe, and act as though we believe, the beliefs that further the project of love -- love-oriented epistemology. According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, love "believes all things". (Presumably love does not believe all things without exception, the exceptions being the things that, if we believe or act on them, make us go against love.) So we have some scriptural precedent for love believing in its own way.

This is similar to the practical epistemology that is altruism-oriented. Altruism assumes that reality is as it says it is in case by doing so it can take care of something that might exist. Altruism doesn't want to risk not doing good when that was possible, even if it's not 100% certain that reality, or a particular reality, actually exists, or will exist in the future.

Both of these epistemologies help to get us out of maximal skepticism / solipsism, and move us to practically believe in reason. We look to the other/beloved because there is some risk of not reaching out to help, some responsibility to the other/beloved, and some reward to reaching out to help. There is some chance that nothing is real, or that reality is non-aggregable or otherwise not amenable to rational figuring-out (and thus we can't inherently expect to be able to build a rational worldview), but we disregard / do not lean on / do not trust that possibility, and instead interact with reality in case it is real, and the reality which is pointed to by reason in case reason is valid, with a sense that there's a risk to what is not us if we don't.

Labels: #altruism, #definition, #epistemology, #love

Self-Interested Epistemology

%self-interested-epistemology

Friday, April 30, 2021

One way out of maximal skepticism / solipsism is to say "I should care about and thus act as though I believe in the existence of what might exist, because what might exist might harm me or help me, and believing in what might exist helps me to maximize my personal outcomes given that possible thing." This attitude takes us a certain way toward being rational, but it's possible to say "I'm content with not knowing reality" or "I don't think reality actually adds up" if you live in a sub-region of reality where it looks like you can get all of your self-interested goals met equally well by having a responsibility to reason as by not having that responsibility.

Love- and altruism-oriented practical epistemologies are psychological / intellectual regimes which more strongly orient people toward reason to which we are responsible, rather than reason to the extent that it is practical for us.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology

How Does God Cope?; Looking to People

%how-does-god-cope-looking-to-people

Friday, April 30, 2021

God has the hardest job in the world. How does he cope? One clue might be found in Job 1:

> 6 Now on the day when God's sons came to present themselves before Yahweh, Satan also came among them. 7 Yahweh said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"
>
> Then Satan answered Yahweh, and said, "From going back and forth in the earth, and from walking up and down in it."
>
> 8 Yahweh said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant, Job? For there is no one like him in the earth, a blameless and an upright man, one who fears God, and turns away from evil."

God notices when we are "blameless, upright, fear him, and turn from evil". That much is stated in the text. How would God feel about such people? He might find them refreshing, encouraging, or pleasing. So while God, as the most-real, is unable to avoid being conscious of all that is bad in the world, he cannot neglect being conscious of all that is good in the world. "The world" fundamentally consists of all the personal beings who make it up. So God is conscious of the good people who do exist.

We can be like God, seeking the truth. If we have a hard time coping in life, a truth-oriented approach would be, like God, to seek people to think about who refresh us, encourage us, please us (in the way that they are pleasing to God).

Matthew 14:

> 22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he sent the multitudes away. 23 After he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into the mountain by himself to pray. When evening had come, he was there alone. 24 But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, distressed by the waves, for the

wind was contrary. 25 In the fourth watch of the night, Jesus came to them, walking on the sea. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It's a ghost!" and they cried out for fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Cheer up! It is I! Don't be afraid."

28 Peter answered him and said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the waters."

29 He said, "Come!"

Peter stepped down from the boat and walked on the waters to come to Jesus. 30 But when he saw that the wind was strong, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!"

31 Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand, took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Being very honest, and not with any intended disrespect, we can sometimes see that some people, when we look on them, are like the strong wind, which cause us to be afraid, and sink. Whereas other people, when we look on them, are like looking at Jesus, or hearing his voice. What is the truth? Jesus declares that he is the truth. Jesus is not always as vivid to us as people we know, so we sometimes need to look at them in order to see the truth backed up by his reality. People connect us to Jesus by being like Jesus, or through their faith in Jesus.

In order to be real, like Jesus, we have to see bad that is in the world as well as good. But some good that we see enables us to see the overall truth. The bad that we see can take that away from us, pathologically.

It occurs to me to add that out of regard for Jesus, it may be good to look to him even when life is easier.

Labels: #God, #mental health, #mental strength, #truth

Idolatry of Moral Anti-realism

%idolatry-of-moral-anti-realism

Sunday, May 2, 2021

I read the following, and it made me think of moral anti-realism and societal best practices:

Isaiah 44

> 9 Everyone who makes a carved image is vain. The things
> that they delight in will not profit. Their own witnesses don't
> see, nor know, that they may be disappointed. 10 Who has
> fashioned a god, or molds an image that is profitable for
> nothing? 11 Behold, all his fellows will be disappointed; and
> the workmen are mere men. Let them all be gathered
> together. Let them stand up. They will fear. They will be put
> to shame together.
>
> 12 The blacksmith takes an ax, works in the coals, fashions it
> with hammers, and works it with his strong arm. He is
> hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water, and is faint.
> 13 The carpenter stretches out a line. He marks it out with a
> pencil. He shapes it with planes. He marks it out with
> compasses, and shapes it like the figure of a man, with the
> beauty of a man, to reside in a house. 14 He cuts down cedars
> for himself, and takes the cypress and the oak, and
> strengthens for himself one among the trees of the forest. He
> plants a cypress tree, and the rain nourishes it. 15 Then it will
> be for a man to burn; and he takes some of it and warms
> himself. Yes, he burns it and bakes bread. Yes, he makes a god
> and worships it; he makes it a carved image, and falls down
> to it. 16 He burns part of it in the fire. With part of it, he eats
> meat. He roasts a roast and is satisfied. Yes, he warms himself
> and says, "Aha! I am warm. I have seen the fire." 17 The rest
> of it he makes into a god, even his engraved image. He bows
> down to it and worships, and prays to it, and says, "Deliver
> me, for you are my god!"
>
> 18 They don't know, neither do they consider, for he has shut

> their eyes, that they can't see, and their hearts, that they can't understand. 19 No one thinks, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, "I have burned part of it in the fire. Yes, I have also baked bread on its coals. I have roasted meat and eaten it. Shall I make the rest of it into an abomination? Shall I bow down to a tree trunk?" 20 He feeds on ashes. A deceived heart has turned him aside; and he can't deliver his soul, nor say, "Isn't there a lie in my right hand?"
>
> 21 Remember these things, Jacob and Israel, for you are my servant. I have formed you. You are my servant. Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. 22 I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, as a cloud, your sins. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.

To some extent, morality is like a god. It's something to which we "bow down", bind ourselves, regard as highest. Also to some extent, we create morality. Society at large does. Sometimes individuals consciously shape what society considers moral. So we create a thing, and then bow down to it.

To some extent, morality comes from pre-rational instinct. Or perhaps it can come from other sources that are also not conscious human decision. However, as a species, we are getting closer to the time where we have arbitrary control of pre-rational instinct or whatever other non-human-judgment sources of morality there are. Less and less will fall outside the realm of human judgment. So then our capacity to make idols will increase. We may shut out the truth of the real God with the invented world.

Not only is there morality, but also the Best Practices associated that are recommended to execute a given morality. We recommend these Best Practices with a religious fervor, because they are the "saving power" aspect of our god, our semi-invented morality being the "legitimacy" aspect.

Labels: #morality, #psychology, #religion

Awareness of Sinfulness

%awareness-of-sinfulness

Monday, May 3, 2021

Having sin as a category is something that has died out in part of the West. Sinfulness is not real to us.

On the other hand, suffering is real. And suffering due to guilty feelings is real.

It may be the case that just as suffering has displaced sin, awareness of sin can sometimes displace suffering. If we care about something greater than suffering, that is, our own sinfulness, then we come into being as moral agents, and this takes away from our obsession to feel good at all times. The obsession gone, we actually feel better.

Suffering due to guilty feelings is real, but it is not exactly awareness of sinfulness. When I am aware of my sinfulness, *I* am. It's not forced on me by social pressure, psychological tricks such as the imagery of hell, or the inborn drive of people to look acceptable to themselves or others. All of these things may be gateways to true awareness of sinfulness, but in themselves they are not it. Awareness of sinfulness is when we, as *ourselves* acknowledge that truth, that *we* are aware of sinfulness. Not victims of psychological (or demonic) forces that say "You did wrong", but rather people who see the truth, as people.

Labels: #mental health, #morality, #note, #psychology, #what is a person?

Process: Eternal Conscious Torment Dominates Reason?

%process-eternal-conscious-torment

Thursday, May 6, 2021

I had intended to find an answer (at least enough of an answer) to the question in the post title and write it in this article. But I find that I can't answer it in a timely fashion, and think it is interesting to post some of my process as I seek an answer. So this post ends with different research directions I could go, rather than answering the questions developed in the body of it.

It's rational to take into consideration the greatest threats to human well-being and then try to avoid them, even if they are relatively unlikely. Annihilation is a threat worth avoiding, but even more so is eternal conscious torment (ECT). If this is the case, then if there is some proposed worldview that contains ECT, we should have to adjust our behaviors to fit it, (almost) no matter how unlikely it is -- unless we can come up with a defeater for that practical belief. ("Practical belief" being something that is believed in by action, whether or not we are fully sure of it epistemically.)

There are a large, potentially infinite, number of worldviews that propose ECT, but if their likelihood is all Pascalian, then we can't practically worry about them, because they cancel each other out. But suppose there is some religion X that proposes ECT (let's say, an analog to the Invisible Flying Spaghetti Monster that gives those who do not eat the dishes it approves of horrendous food poisoning for all eternity). Let's say we have some small amount of rational evidence for its truth, which pushes its credence above the Pascalian, into the non-Pascalian. So now, are we practically obliged to observe the list of approved foods (which is heavy on pasta)? Is its food poisoning a strong enough consideration to swamp whatever good comes from committing to the God of MSLN? Sure, MSLN's God promises eternal life. But how can the promised reward of eternal life compare with the promised threat of eternal food poisoning? (And of course, the Stringent Invisible Flying Spaghetti Monster (SIFSM) offers a paradise of delicious pasta dishes and also transcendent high-qualia-of-ought-to-be-ness-inducing salads, for all eternity, a reward which easily equals any similarly hedonic heaven that God could offer.)

The threat of ECT is worth considering, no matter how little evidence there is for it, provided there is some. So how can we parse this situation? Do we have to let ECT dominate reason? We might be 99% sure of the truth of MSLN, but only 1% sure of the truth of SIFSM, and strangely

enough turn away from and fail to trust the God that is very likely to exist for the one who is very likely to not exist, just because the expected (dis)value of ignoring the unlikely one promises to be so high. This does not seem like an entirely desirable situation to be in, from the standpoint of the intersection of good practice with good believing. Is there some kind of "practico-epistemic" (to coin a word that perhaps doesn't need coining) filter to keep us from having to act as though we believe in just any even-barely-non-Pascalian ECT worldview?

Here's one way to try to get out: Christianity, for better or worse, has had on the books some kind of ECT doctrine for its entire existence. It's debatable whether the Bible really teaches it, but for the purposes of this, just that it is debatable is strong enough. The evidence for Christianity is considerable. Hundreds of millions of people perceive it to be true, and perceive that its God exists. The only competitors to it on that scale are the worldviews of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and secularism. Certainly some upstart like SIFSM doesn't have that level of witness. This traditional Christianity threatens a hell that is just as bad as the worst conceivable food poisoning, for just as long, all eternity. So it has the same penalty, but is more likely, and therefore dominates SIFSM, practico-epistemically.

However, now we have to set ECT-affirming Christianity and ECT-affirming Islam side by side. So how can we tell what to do? Should we form a saving relationship with Jesus, God who became a man, son of God? Or with Allah, the one who has no equals? Arguably, the penalty and reward for both are both infinite and equal, ECT and paradise. Now how can we tell which one to favor practico-epistemically? Are we reduced to flipping a coin and hoping for the best?

At this point, I would like to bring in MSLN and say, "look, MSLN can give us a lot of evidence in favor of Christianity, so we should favor ECT-affirming Christianity". On some level, this makes sense. In a religious sense, I (as an MSLN Christian) feel more kinship with those ECT-affirming Christians who are really shaped by Jesus' teachings than I do with Muslims. But, is it really "legal" to use MSLN to do that in this case? MSLN rules out ECT. So if the idea is to have a Christian worldview that teaches ECT which logically dominates all the others which teach ECT, so that people can pick one right (hell-safe) worldview, can we support that worldview with auxiliary arguments that deny ECT?

I'll step back for a minute and consider, what's at stake here? If people don't believe Christianity is true, there is some increased risk of them not accepting Jesus in this life and going to a hell of ECT (traditional, ECT-affirming Christianity) or becoming hardened to the voice of Jesus in this life or in the Millennium (New Wine Christianity). If they don't believe SIFSM is true, perhaps they are similarly at risk of ECT. SIFSM seems exceedingly unlikely to me (especially because I haven't found any arguments in favor of it, have only just asserted the image of it -- it only

hypothetically has evidence in favor of it). But because it favors ECT, it can seem like a greater threat than the far more likely MSLN. If people did not put their practico-epistemic trust in MSLN, in favor of SIFSM, and they took this to an extreme, completely turning toward SIFSM and away from MSLN, they would probably be annihilated, all to avoid a distantly-likely infinite threat.

One natural way out of this is to say "Okay, I'm pretty sure that MSLN is true, but I'll stay away from those forbidden dishes. Who knows, maybe I can keep from experiencing eternal food poisoning that way". However, when we bring in something like Islam into the picture, we now find ourselves practico-epistemically encouraged to... worship both Allah and Jesus? In the old days, the people of God often tried to do that kind of thing, and God was not happy. Somehow God expects us to be able to figure out that he's the one for us without us betting a little in favor of the saving power of all the others. This exclusivity over against hedging is something that I expect is operative in Islam as well.

One "supernatural" way out ("supernatural" in a Weilian sense, maybe), is to say that ECT and annihilation are red herrings. Hell is a big distraction. True well-being is to love. Even if you get trapped in ECT, if you really love, then you are truly fortunate. So if we're weighing Likelihood against Threat, ask yourself if the threats even matter. Annihilation prevents you from loving, but ECT does not (arguably). Neither of them prevent you from becoming a loving person "NOW", in this life. In the book of your life, you can always make the best choices you can. Perhaps even likelihood can be ignored (at least as an absolute in determining practical epistemology), and all that's left is to say "what is genuinely beautiful, and more important than that, what is genuinely true? If I'm not looking for what is true according to my own fears, desires, etc., but only for truth in itself, what do I see?" Likelihood has some connection to that, but threat does not.

And yet what is love if not (in part) to protect others (or yourself) from threats? Maybe the real threat is to not learn to love "NOW". This is in keeping with MSLN. But hell (historically, the threat of ECT; or in MSLN, the threat of punishment and annihilation) is a useful doctrine (and reality) in helping some of those at greatest risk of hardening to turn toward God. We don't necessarily all value love of God for itself at first.

What this might mean is that for some, hell is and has been convincing in a way that leads them to love God, so it's a good thing. But for those who understand somewhat more, it creates issues such as the possibility of something like the SIFSM. But then those who understand more than that see that Likelihood dominates Threat, when we define the real threat to be not being in line with the truth that is orthogonal to well-being, which turns out to be God.

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This all has some bearing on how to understand the metaphysical organism argument. Part of that argument says that there is some (I would now say "non-Pascalian") chance that God exists, given the issue of consciousness vs. matter and how there's some reason to think that the Metaphysical Organism's existence could settle it. So we should act like God exists, if it is not costly. But should we act as though the Father, or Allah, or Krishna, or the SIFSM, or...? exist, based only on the metaphysical organism argument? One action that argument recommends is prayer, as well as a "costless" trust. Do we pray to all of them, or trust in all of them? Arguably, to fully trust God, we must go all in on some path of trusting him. But the metaphysical organism argument, by itself, does not warrant us choosing any particular God (so long as that God conforms to the description of the Metaphysical Organism -- currently, of the gods listed above, only the Christian Father as found in MSLN / the New Wine System fits the description). So if we are MO-only believers, we should pray to "the true God, whoever you are". That way, whatever God really exists, we will have been praying to him/her/etc. all along. That God will want us to understand him/her/etc. better and provide ways to do that, when the right time comes.

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But then, I keep thinking, isn't either a Muslim or Christian ECT possible, and shouldn't we warn people away from it? I am okay with saying that my own eternal well-being is less important than seeking what is true apart from Threat, and learning to love no matter my experiential circumstance. But what about other people's eternal well-being?

So I think there could be more thinking done here.

One possible route is to explore if there are non-MSLN reasons to prefer either ECT-affirming Christianity or ECT-affirming Islam (or some Hindu or Buddhist equivalent?). This sounds like a lot of work, to understand these religions enough to say one is better than another, and is not my first choice to find an answer here.

A second possible route is to consider the possibility that Reformed epistemology is invalid, or not valid enough. Reformed epistemology says that we have noetic perceptions of God, and those beliefs are good enough to make the resulting beliefs in God rational, for some definition of "rational". Presumably Muslims have noetic perceptions of God. Do we have any solid evidence for revelation (the Bible or Quran) apart from "faith" (a belief produced in us supernaturally by God, which is itself a perception of God)? This version of "faith" may turn out to be in a Pascalian situation (there could be as many believable gods as there are people who bother to invent them), and if so, we have no reason to trust

either the Bible or the Quran as revelation, just from that "faith" belief. So whatever the books say about ECT isn't something that can threaten us. Then to choose between the two, we would look to some kind of reason, perhaps a natural theology like MSLN, to choose which one to follow.

(One could say that perhaps Christianity and Islam contain within them people who have these arguably-supernatural "faith" beliefs, but that these beliefs do not arise on command for some religion-inventor. But in the future, maybe we will be able to engineer such belief-experiences, which will be taken as the *occasions* for God (or the IFSM or SIFSM, etc.) to touch our minds. So then we will still be able to invent some kind of reason to believe in whatever beliefs a religion can contain.)

Or is it possibly the case that both Christians and Muslims see God noetically, and are seeing the same being, whose real nature they disagree about, but neither of them noetically see (with the same justification as the "basic belief" in God) that ECT is valid? (ECT in this scenario would have to be something added on, by certain readings of the Bible or Quran, to the basic undifferentiated theistic faith derived by noetic perception.)

If we are in a basically Pascalian situation with respect to ECT, we will need stronger evidence (Likelihood) to get an answer of what to do, practically.

I would think it very strange to think that noetic perception is not at all valid, and that if it is valid, that perceptions of God (or of anything) in a noetic way yield absolutely no evidence that such things are real. But on the other hand, while I found Reformed epistemology (my source for the concept of "noetic perception"; as read about in Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*) to be helpful when I was younger, I also found it vaguely dissatisfying, and perhaps at this point in my life I would be better able to figure out why. Exactly how far can noetic perception go? Does Reformed epistemology equally justify Islam (or other belief systems)? Re-reading *Warranted Christian Belief* was already seeming interesting to me, and this is another vote in favor of doing that.

The third route to go is to explore, just what are the "axioms" of ECT? What are all the truths that must be true for us to even have the situation of being threatened by ECT? And then, once we have identified those truths, what else do they imply? In math (if I understand correctly), if you properly understand addition, you have to understand some basic axioms. Then, once you understand those axioms, you can build new things, which are not addition, and which you couldn't directly get from addition. But (I think) the validity of addition implies the validity of the things derived from addition's axioms. This is the most attractive of the three routes (as of today [the day I wrote that draft]), and so I hope to have something to say on the topic in a later post or posts.

Labels: #Alvin Plantinga, #Christianity, #epistemology, #Islam, #rationality, #religion

Is Holiness the End of Childhood?

%is-holiness-end-of-childhood

Sunday, May 9, 2021

See also Immaturity, Sin, and Family.

The loss of childhood has a touch of tragedy to it. You may live forever, but will your past selves? I'm significantly different from who I was as an eight-year-old, to the point that if I met him in a different eight-year-old's body (so that I couldn't see a physical resemblance to me), I might not realize he was me. Will that eight-year-old be resurrected on the last day? I think I've written about this somewhere in my notes and wonder, but do not remember, what I had to say then. But my sense, from what I've read is, no? Probably not?

Some people, who love their childhoods, try to prolong them into adulthood. Maybe the real phenomenon is to prolong an adolescence that values childhood. They might do this for years, presumably to keep alive the old ways.

Is holiness the end of childhood? For "holiness", you could substitute "spiritual development", "spiritual maturity", "being in tune with God", "becoming truly wise", "overcoming sin" or even "coming to fully love and trust God". In my mind, all of these are one thing, which has all of those facets. They can seem to involve giving up some aspect of yourself, possibly your childhood. So someone who values childhood might resist them, and in the process, cause harm or even risk hardening.

We generally always have to give something up for holiness or pay more for it than we were initially willing to pay. And that may be the case with holiness and childhood. However, I think there are people who can retain their childlikeness as well as developing their spiritual maturity without holding back. They are open to the process of development as much as it calls for, and do not resist it for the sake of keeping their childhood. And the process of development does not call them to lose their childlikeness, so they keep it. By contrast, holding onto childishness is something that the process of development (God working in us) will not want to keep, though we may want to.

Childlikeness is a positive thing in itself, but there may be something better. God shapes us to be instruments (a utilitarian metaphor) or inhabitants of niches (an ecological one). Our purpose may involve us

losing aspects of who we are which are good in themselves.

So holiness is necessarily the end of one part of childhood, and may be, but is not necessarily, the end of another part.

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Could there be a recovery of childlikeness as we mature? I don't see why that can't be.

Being attached to childhood too much can be like any other attachment that is too much, something which competes with God in our hearts. When we are mature, we may not have our old tastes and desires, and probably won't long to be any particular way, other than connected to God.

Labels: #childhood, #God, #holiness, #maturity

Concept of God Affects Personal Experience of God

%concept-of-god-affects-personal

Tuesday, May 11, 2021

How do we know God through personal experience? Generally, we have some concept of God, and we find that some of our experience fits that concept, and we call that the voice of God.

This God known through personal experience is usually on our side, and approaching God through personal experience has the virtue of allowing us to always be right about him. A person who's seeing what appears to be a yellow rose shouldn't believe anyone who tells them they are not seeing what appears to be a yellow rose, and no one has a truth-based right to contradict the yellow-rose-seer. So if we see God as we experience him, we definitely see God as we experience him.

The danger is that our concepts of God, the ones that form our concept of what "God" can mean and thus which of our experiences are from God, may not be in line with the God who actually exists. We may fail to have receptors for sides of his character that we don't believe in, and thus fail to find those to be of him through personal experience. We know that God is love, but we think of love in human terms. So, though it threatens to be wearying and confusing (but it isn't always), we need to either study the "outside view" to our experiences of God for ourselves (find the truth of God found in the holistic relationship of truths, including revelation), or somehow figure out which teachers of the truth we can listen to -- but a good teacher should make it so that we see the truth for ourselves. In this way we will not be misled by a version of God that fits what is convenient or culturally acceptable but which is actually risky and untrue to God.

Labels: #epistemology, #God, #truth

Apologetics to Identify God

%apologetics-to-identify-god

Tuesday, May 11, 2021

Normally apologetics tries to say "God exists, a particular god does." We assert an image and then try to show that that image is rooted in reality.

Another, rarer use (unprecedented?) is to evaluate a superpowerful being that claims to be God. We have something that seems like it could be God, but is it? Or is it just a very powerful being, perhaps some kind of alien, AI, or the voice or avatar of some finite being that is running our simulation (if it's possible to live in a simulation)?

This may come into play at the end of the world, if something similar-enough to the events in Revelation occur.

What is God? What makes God God? The MSLN answer is that power ultimately comes from authority, and authority comes from legitimacy, which comes from knowing everything there is to know, and being disposed to undergo the effects of one's will to the greatest extent possible. So plausible candidates for "God on earth" would have to conform to that pattern, if MSLN is to be believed.

Labels: #epistemology, #eschatology, #God, #note, #power

ECT in Islam and Classical Theist Christianity

%ect-in-islam-and-classical-theist

Wednesday, May 12, 2021

I don't know a lot about Islam (I read the Quran, a Western "overview of Islam" book, and three Sufi-related books last spring), but I remember the God of Islam being omniscient. (This page, among others, confirms).

If God (Allah) is omniscient, wouldn't he experience the torment of any ECT he was causing, exactly as those undergoing it? Otherwise he wouldn't know everything. Perhaps someone more knowledgeable in Islam than I am can follow up on this and see if this leads us to thinking Allah wouldn't cause ECT, just like the God of MSLN.

Incidentally, the classical theist Christian God, held to by some (or most?) conservative, ECT-affirming Christians, would also have to be omniscient enough to suffer whatever hell he caused. Would the God of classical theist Christianity want to suffer hell for all eternity? I'm also not versed enough in classical theists' thoughts, to know what they would make of it.

Labels: #Christianity, #Islam, #note, #suffering God

Book Review Preview: Warranted Christian Belief by Alvin Plantinga

%book-review-preview-warranted-christian

Wednesday, May 12, 2021

See also the review and postview.

I got my copy of *Warranted Christian Belief* in the mail yesterday. I have read this book, back when I was college, probably in 2008 or 2009. So I have a vague memory of what it says, beyond its basic premise.

Here are some questions I'm interested in answering:

It could be claimed that Reformed epistemology equally justifies Islamic belief, so how can we tell between Christianity and Islam? This is potentially a very important question, because both of them teach hell. If one of them is right and we don't believe it, we may end up not being saved. Does Plantinga have anything to say that closes off the possibility of other religions being just as justified as Christianity via their own properly basic beliefs?

Another objection: If I have what reasonably enough seems to me to be a properly basic belief in God, and then it goes away (and maybe then comes back, and then goes away, and so on), what should I think about whether God really does exist? Should I trust the beliefs in God when they come? Does Plantinga address this at all?

A question: did Abraham have warranted [not exactly "Christian", but maybe we could say "Yahwist"] belief? We have the benefit of billions of fellow Christians to validate our belief. But he was alone at first. If there was someone like him in our day, we would likely think him to be a crazy person who trusted the "voices in his head". How did Abraham know that he was listening to God? Did he not even really know? The Bible presents him as an exemplar of faith. Should we believe like Abraham? I'm wondering if Plantinga addresses this to any extent. (A side question: what is the Bible's epistemology?)

Here is a question / set of questions that, to be fair, may not need to be answered by Plantinga, for being outside his area of expertise, and that I don't really expect the text to directly address. But maybe after I'm done reading the book, I will have a better idea of what I think the answer is,

and I can report it when I do the postview for this book. The question is, to what extent does adopting a Reformed epistemology-based approach to belief incline a person to no longer index themselves to reason, and therefore not feel driven to any of reason's other conclusions, the whole skein of perceptions, intellectual relations, and cause-and-effect in which people live?

Is this an approach to truth that inclines us to weep like Jesus (who was weeping when technically he didn't have to, because of his superior divine knowledge), or more toward a kind of inactivity, or even self-satisfaction? For the portion of the church that has learned that faith is superior to reason in producing belief in God, is there a danger that that attitude produces ineffective, unproductive Christians? Perhaps also Christians who can no longer relate to the people who don't have that faith that's superior to reason. Do we trust reason less when our assurance of salvation no longer comes through it, and thus fail to follow the law of reason which normally forces us to interact with the world?

Can we become intellectually lazy about the nature of God? If belief is something that we can directly access and which suffices for us, do we assume too easily that we understand God, and do not correct our understanding through natural theology or even Scripture study (which are both based in reason)?

I don't think Plantinga would say that reason doesn't matter at all, since he went to the trouble to write a 500 page book that is based in reason, to try to justify taking faith as properly basic. But I think there's something semi-fideist if not fideist about the idea that "it's rational to just have faith through the belief that you have", more so than something like "it's rational to have faith because of [MSLN or something like it, a chain of reasons, reasons like "there's a high likelihood that all that exists is consciousness"]".

Labels: #Alvin Plantinga, #book review, #Christianity, #epistemology, #faith, #Islam

Relating to My Reality

%relating-to-my-reality

Thursday, May 13, 2021

Let's say I'm having a day where I tend to feel bad. I am prone to bad moods. Being in a bad mood is something that hides itself. Instead, I see things in a bad light. But the things themselves aren't the real issue. It's the mood that's the problem.

By identifying that the mood is the problem, I can stop seeing things in a bad light. When I do that, my mood improves. We might also think that by realizing that my mood is my problem, I am accepting it, instead of resisting it, and this makes me feel better.

However, we can take this basic situation a couple of different directions, besides the above. One is to say that the mood is a thing other than me. When it is other than me, I can be myself. I am no longer it, and although it is still something I feel, I exist apart from it and can relate to it. Becoming myself (for the nth time) is something that enables me to see the truth and God -- I was myself all along, and God always existed, but I lost sight of that truth. All truth is known by a person relating to what is not-them. (This is a kind of simantist approach.)

Another way to go is to say that we live on different levels. There is the level of feeling in the moment, and the social reality, the one we can easily talk about. Then there is the spiritual reality. With those who have spiritual eyes, it's possible to see a mood as something profound, as a spiritual reality (a certain kind of life reality and simantic word). There is something deep about life, and understanding the depth of a situation can bring peace -- at least on some levels. To see that, spiritually, "here I am", stuck as I am inside the giant fishbowl of a mood, that fishbowl is a profound thing and I am deep in it, and oddly, this can bring peace through depth. (This is somewhat analogous to Hassel's levels of consciousness.)

Labels: #mental health, #psychology

Deceptive Truths

%deceptive-truths

Thursday, May 13, 2021

30 August 2023: clarification.

A deceptive truth is one which is 100% true in itself but because of something other than it, leads to the person coming to know it to believe something false, potentially to the extent that they are in a worse state epistemically or fiducially for having known it. This might be because there was some kind of misleading lawyerly case which the deceptive truth is taken to be part of once believed. Or it could be because the believer feels a certain way after knowing it (anger, self-satisfaction, optimism, despair, etc.) which causes them to fail to see some other truth. Or it could be because knowledge, even if partial, creates the illusion of being knowledgeable, which reduces a person's interest in learning. (Or there could be other reasons a true belief could cause you to not relate properly.)

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #psychology

Epistemology of Seeking Overall Truth

%epistemology-of-seeking-overall-truth

Friday, May 14, 2021

If you are seeking to only have true beliefs, then the closer you keep to descriptive epistemology, the better. You would favor a conservative epistemology, in which you avoid believing beliefs unless you have to, or unless they pass the strictest tests. But if you are seeking to know the overall truth better, the way that all the truths work together, it might be better to believe more apparent truths, at the risk of believing some false individual truths, because to understand the bigger picture requires more data. One might ask, what good are high quality individual truths if you don't know the bigger picture in which they fit? They could be deceptive truths, for not being placed in the right context.

Labels: #epistemology, #note, #truth

Guidance Rather Than Knowledge

%guidance-rather-than-knowledge

Saturday, May 15, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional -- maybe the definition of "guidance" could use more detail.

18 May 2021: made minor changes.

It's possible that when we seek to know things, we are missing the point of knowledge unless we go beyond "knowledge is justified true belief" or something like that to "guidance is knowledge that is not misleading in practice".

For instance, if I am a racist, learning the 100% true-in-itself fact of someone's skin color may mislead me, because of other beliefs and values that I have. Guidance requires a right connection to both "is" and "ought". Or I may fill my soul with knowledge to the point of satiation, and from that for some reason (sort of understandable, sort of not) think or trust that I need seek no more truth. So all the truths that I acquired mislead me, if there's something I still need to learn.

Guidance is connected to importance, the importance of a fact, so guidance requires a proper relationship to both "is" and "ought". To have a "justified true judgment-of-right-guidance" requires that we have morality which is real and sufficiently knowable, and that we believe in whatever axiologies other than morality might exist which relate to guidance -- for instance, the values contained in and supporting rationality, (assuming that you can split axiology into parts, given the interrelatedness of values) -- and that we can access knowledge of those axiologies (or the one axiology), and the pragmatics needed to seek them (or it), sufficiently. Thus, there really is such a thing as a place worth being guided to, and it is possible for guidance to take us there if we listen to it.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #morality, #rationality, #trust

Axioms of Trusting; Trustworthy and Anti-Trustworthy Places

%axioms-of-trusting-trustworthy-and-anti

Wednesday, May 19, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional.

Trusting is when you connect to a reality outside yourself on a deep level -- staking your being or some element of your being on it. It is a real connection between you and and what is not-you.

What reality do you connect to? You connect to the thing that you directly trust, but also other things. A definition for "trust" is "receptivity to enhancement". You affirm that there is such a thing as enhancement, and the possibility of not being enhanced. So you connect to meaning and ought. You also connect to trustworthiness itself.

When you trust, there is a letting-go. You enter a new reality when you believe something rather than continuing to try to apply the strictest doubt to it. If you believe (thus, trust) something that could possibly be wrong, there is some chance that you fail to believe what would save you. To exist is to accept that you might be wrong, or rather to live in the reality in which you are not wrong and will not die, which is trust. If you succeeded in not trusting anything, you would be dead.

This reality of not being wrong and not dying is a kind of taste of heaven which we can visit in this life, but not forever. (Often enough, we are betrayed.) Having gone to that place, we know it exists. We may not know the full nature of the place, of trustworthiness. We don't know that everything will turn out right for us, just because trustworthiness exists. But somehow that place exists.

Compare trustworthiness to the fantasy world in a book (Arrakis, Middle-Earth, etc.). Why not believe that Arrakis exists as a real place? You can go there in your imagination. I would say that the difference between Arrakis and trustworthiness is that you can enter trustworthiness with your whole being, but not Arrakis.

Or perhaps you can enter Arrakis with your whole being, and can go to live there. I don't expect to be able to. But trustworthiness is a basic thing. It's not culturally-dependent like Arrakis, and it is woven through one's

entire life. Trustworthiness is clothed with the five senses, and the noetic sense as well, and if Arrakis is trusted, it's included as a subcomponent of trustworthiness, in the imagination. So trustworthiness can encompass all of reality, in a way that it seems Arrakis cannot. Arrakis is not a necessary component of personal existing, whereas trustworthiness / trusting is.

What about other psychological states that come over us? Perhaps anger or sadness can take us out of trustworthiness. Does a place of ultimate and unending anger exist? That sounds like hell to me. Maybe it does. Does hell have to exist as a place forever as it seems to promise? Hell is not bound to tell the truth about itself the way trustworthiness is. We always trust, but anger can overtake us. Similarly joy may exist as a place, but it seems like it's just one of the expressions or modes of trustworthiness. So there are fundamentally two places, perhaps, trustworthiness and hell, the anti-trustworthy place.

We are jarred out of trustworthiness, but only for a time, before we someday return to it. And there is a partial access to trustworthiness which is even in our lives as we return, at all times.

Can we trust that of which we have no conscious access, neither with the senses nor noetically? I don't think so. So can we have direct personal connection, whether to trust and remain in trustworthiness or be betrayed, with that of which we have no conscious access? I don't think so, either. So then how can we have personal connection with what cannot affect either us or our experiences? If a mind can mediate between us and some unconscious reality, then that mind would have to trust it, so as to be affected by it, and it would have to be a mind or experience. So that leaves experiences. Can experiences exist outside of minds, or have causal power of themselves? This is doubtful. So trust gives us reason to doubt the efficacy of unconscious beings, which are neither minds nor experiences. Even the bullet that kills completely unexpectedly probably must be mediated by a mind, and thus would be an experience.

But what about when we trust things in an unconscious way? Are there such trustings? It's possible to enter a state of trusting, consciously, and then remain in it, unconsciously. The past self consciously trusted, but the present self remains in the state of receptivity to enhancement toward the trusted reality. In the case that we trust that the infinite possible evils will not affect us, those which we haven't imagined, then those evils may not exist in any sense, having not been imagined, and what we really trust is trustworthiness itself, which says "you will live forever". Similarly, if we trust the unimagined goods that may come, we are trusting trustworthiness itself. We have a noetic sense of trustworthiness, at all times.

The axioms of the act of trusting are 1) consciousness exists, 2) you exist, 3) what is not-you exists, 4) you can directly contact what is not-you in a deeply personal way, through trust, 5) trustworthiness exists, 6)

enhancement exists, 6a) meaning exists, 6b) legitimacy exists 7) trust is most likely (or is certainly?) only of minds, experiences or beings reducible to minds or experiences.

What can we derive from these axioms? Overall, it looks like God exists. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 support the metaphysical organism argument. Those points and 6a support simantism, those points and 6b support legitimism.

5 seems like something that points to the existence of heaven. If trustworthiness promises that there is such a place as trustworthiness, but there is no such place, it itself is not trustworthy. That's a little like the qualia of redness itself not being red. Or the qualia of goodness not being itself good, something which Sharon Rawlette argues against. I wanted to argue against her, but had to admit it was hard to conceive of the qualia of goodness as not being good (although more than that could be good). Perhaps the qualia of goodness just are the qualia of trustworthiness, and are valuable as a promise, if not the complete reality, of what ought to be.

If there is a place where a person can be not-wrong and live forever, it seems like the kind of place that God could arrange, by bringing us into tune with reality, and by keeping us alive. For having suffered so much to raise us, God is the kind of being who is truly motivated to keep us alive forever, something which we can't necessarily even say of ourselves.

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Trustworthiness is not just a property of where we are, but of who we are. We might suppose that, though humans are made to some extent of how they are arranged, they are also made of their material. So there must exist some source of personality that is truly trustworthy.

People in a trustworthy place need to be trustworthy, themselves. When we trust, we are trustworthy, in that trustworthy place, although we break out of it due to the untrustworthiness of ourselves, or of the things in our lives, which break us out of the place, into betrayal. When you are fully absorbed in returning a serve while playing tennis, it is like you are in heaven and are free from sin (and in a sense, you really are there and are that), but when your anger returns on the way home after being cut off on the freeway, both life and you have (if not sooner) proven your untrustworthiness.

The source of the material of trustworthy personality is a truly trustworthy person. For all that we arrange ourselves to be trustworthy, we must receive the spirit of this person in order to be trustworthy ourselves and thus part of unbreaking trustworthiness.

Labels: #epistemology, #God, #metaphysics, #psychology, #trust

Book Review Preview: Omnisubjectivity by Linda Zagzebski

%book-review-preview-omnisubjectivity-by

Wednesday, May 19, 2021

Omnisubjectivity, by Linda Zagzebski, looks like it might be an academic philosophy defense of what I would call "solidarity", the aspect of the metaphysical organism whereby it inherently experiences the exact experiences of the beings with which it has metaphysical contact. I would assume that Zagzebski might not be approaching things from a basically Berkeleian perspective as I do, so there might be some friction there. It might be good to see how far omnisubjectivity can be defended from a more traditional Christian perspective, if that's the perspective she takes.

Labels: #book review, #God, #suffering God

Book Review and Postview: Omnisubjectivity by Linda Zagzebski

%book-review-and-postview

Wednesday, May 19, 2021

I read *Omnisubjectivity*, by Linda Zagzebski. This book is short (43 pages of actual material), and I wouldn't recommend buying it, for the price. But if you find it at a library, I might recommend reading it, if you are interested in the concept of God directly experiencing the experiences of his creation, from the perspective of a Catholic philosopher. Zagzebski's approach might be a little more to the taste of someone from a traditional Christian background than my own writing is.

It might be good to know that she wrote an essay on omnisubjectivity titled "Omnisubjectivity" in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, volume 1, ed. by Jonathan Kvanvig. This also looks like something I would prefer checking out of a library to buying.

In this review, I focus on how Zagzebski's project interfaces with my own, or gives me reason to connect with some of her "news" (she brings up issues that come from the world of classical theism).

I don't think that Zagzebski would have reason to object to my philosophy, at least in my basic project where it might overlap with hers, because we both affirm that omnisubjectivity is something that does not involve God being identical to the consciousnesses of creatures, of which he has subjective knowledge.

In her understanding, God makes a constant renewal (my words) of his awareness of other beings, like we do when we practice human-scale empathy. He experiences what he's experiencing, rather than what we are experiencing, but his experiences are (perfectly) faithfully copied from our own.

In my understanding, God experiences the exact experiences of his creatures, but is different from them by experiencing more than those exact experiences, including some which are private to him. God is able to be himself by being more than our consciousnesses -- a certain kind of distance made possible by being even more conscious, rather than less.

Zagzebski defends her theory from the idea that God is made a sinner by

being subjective to our sinful conscious states. I would defend my theory by saying that a person is sinful based on their disposition or heart, not based on their experiences. If a demon overtakes a person and causes them to be angry, it's not necessarily because the person really wants to be angry, and that shouldn't count as sin -- it doesn't in God's eyes, although humans may still be suspicious.

Zagzebski brings up counterfactual subjectivity. Is it possible to experience the experiences of people in possible worlds? I hadn't thought of that possibility. Is it necessary for an omniscient God to experience the experiences of every counterfactual consciousness? For today, I will say that I favor saying that possible worlds only exist as imaginations, and therefore have no reality of their own. God need not experience what only exists as an imagination if such imaginations have not been imagined. It might be useful, somewhat like Zagzebski says, to think counterfactually for the purpose of doing the right thing better. If imagining someone's thought process in a human, empathic way is useful, then why not use omnisubjectivity to actually know, rather than guess at, the way someone would feel in a given situation?

However, I do not think that people can be perfectly predicted, because their free will has not acted yet. So God could only guess, and would consider multiple possibilities.

Because the book mentions them, I'll briefly mention the divine attributes of timelessness, immutability, and impassibility. I don't see a reason to think that God is impassible (can't feel emotions). (Zagzebski doesn't think impassibility and omnisubjectivity are compatible, and I agree. She does think immutability and timelessness are compatible with omnisubjectivity.) I can see that following immutability, one might arrive at impassibility. But I would say, yes, there is some element of God which is immutable, and another which is not, and figuring out the difference is important. I don't see a reason, at this time, to think that God is timeless.

Perhaps most salient for me right now is the question of Eternal Conscious Torment. Does God experience the torment of hell for all eternity? Zagzebski does not address this issue in this book, although she mentions that God may be able to timelessly apprehend a timely reality in one moment. I don't think this is really the same experience though. I think a timely experience is one which is experienced in time, and so omniscience requires being in time, such that ECT lasts forever for any omniscient God (if ECT exists).

Labels: #book review, #God, #psychology, #suffering God

Can Good Experiences Balance Out Eternal Conscious Torment?

%can-good-experiences-balance-out

Wednesday, May 26, 2021

If you were in hell, God would feel it, just as you did. He would experience your firsthand experience, which would be of hell and nothing but hell. But God is aware of other experiences, some which are not hellish. So would God be able to bear eternal conscious torment, that which came from really knowing what it was like to be you-in-hell, simply by also experiencing all the non-hell experiences firsthand?

We might think about the analogy of a body. Maybe you have a severe chronic pain that affects one part of your body. But you are also undergoing a pleasurable experience in another part of your body. If the pleasurable experience is strong enough, and chronic, could it allow you to experience your pain forever? I think it could, but only by taking your awareness away from the pain. And in that respect, you wouldn't really be feeling the pain anymore, although in some sense it would still be there.

God would be aware of our pain, as fully aware of it as we would be. So if God really knows what it's like for us to undergo ECT, he does so without being able to rest, even if on some level he knows that there is much that is good.

Labels: #fear, #God, #note, #suffering God

Can God Understand Love and yet be Evil?

%can-god-understand-love-and-yet-be-evil

Wednesday, May 26, 2021

What can we know about God by examining the simantic words?

Can an evil being truly understand love and remain evil? How about the opposite? Can God truly understand sadism (or whatever other lovelessness) and remain good?

Do sadists truly understand sadism? Then they would understand the consequences of their sadism. They never do, never feel the affliction of those they torture as the afflicted one feels their affliction. Someone who understands sadism fully who also understands love fully will prefer love over sadism.

Labels: #empathy, #God, #note

Greatness of God

%greatness-of-god

Thursday, May 27, 2021

Anselm of Canterbury said that God was a being than which no greater being can be conceived". We somehow think that God by definition must be the greatest being.

Perhaps this is the correct way of going about things. However, we must be careful to understand what greatness really is. If we don't, then we will believe in images of God which are "the greatest which can be conceived according to the tastes of humans like ourselves". Those tastes may, or may not, be aligned with God's tastes.

Labels: #glory, #God, #note, #valuing

What is Unbearable to Legitimacy

%what-is-unbearable-to-legitimacy

Thursday, May 27, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional.

In my notes for my review of Sharon Rawlette's *Feeling of Value*, I noted that it is possible to feel pain which is unbearable, but which neither ought to be, nor ought not to be.

The unbearability causes (in the realm of "is") a person to react against the pain, but that does not mean that the pain really should (in the realm of "ought") be acted against, nor that they believe that it should be acted against.

But what would it mean for legitimacy itself (God himself) to find something unbearable? It would mean that it ought not to be. Legitimacy itself would be unable to accept it -- this sounds exactly like it really should not be.

Labels: #God, #metaethics, #note, #suffering God

Gating Off Voices; Especially Ones That Speak of ECT

%gating-off-voices-especially-ones-that

Thursday, May 27, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional.

31 May 2021: see this addendum.

Gating Off Voices

Not every voice is worth listening to. Sometimes there are voices that tell you you are worthless, a failure, or doomed, or ones that tell you that this life is all that matters, or ones which are other people's misinterpretations of you, or their agendas for you -- there are probably other unworthy voices that are out there.

So it can seem appealing to shut those voices out, to irrevocably invalidate them, so that you can get on with your life.

But what if you're wrong about which voices are unworthy, and one which you shut out might be the voice of God? There is some danger of hardening here.

The state of mind where you put up no resistance to the voices that try to colonize your mind is one in which it is difficult or even impossible to follow God with your whole being. Perhaps your real disposition, underneath all the colonizations, is one of following God with your whole being, if that state of non-resistance to colonization is something you can't help. But if you can help it, it isn't clear to me that preferring non-resistance (such that you don't try rejecting any voices) is a better way to avoid hardening, since that preference roots you in a stable and seemingly undefeatable belief or believing regime, the one in which you can never commit. "I can never commit to God" may be just as hardened as "I reject God".

In that case, you always take a risk of being hardened, so, fearing and respecting the fact of that risk to the appropriate degree, you might as well choose the path that helps you serve God best as you understand him right now, in hopes that he will keep working with you so that someday your understanding presents no obstacle to loving and trusting him. If God doesn't exist, then hardening doesn't matter, so if hardening matters, it matters how we relate to God, and sometimes it is best to deliberately shut out some of the pathological voices in order to hear his better. God can see

you trying to hear him, and knows your true disposition, and wants you to succeed in hearing him.

A mind that shuts out voices is in danger of becoming intolerant and totalizing. It's important that whatever you do psychologically, whether in the realm of perception, emotion, willing, or intellectual believing, you do it as though God exists. Among other things, God is one who wants you and everyone else to be saved, who is the father of you and everyone else, and whom you and everyone else can trust. With God's Spirit, we don't see things through the lens of control and self-preservation. We can believe firmly without mistreating or enslaving people.

Reality must be that which we can think about?

Does all this give a rationale for refusing to listen to voices that say something like "You have a tiny but non-Pascalian chance of going to a hell of eternal conscious torment"? The thought that you could go to hell might cause you to love and trust in God more. Certainly that's how it seems to have worked as a part of evangelism in the past. Probably it is not necessary to believe in eternal conscious torment (ECT) for that purpose. (Annihilation is sufficiently motivating, and sometimes even that is not necessary to motivate people.) But ECT got people to take God seriously, which is part of loving and trusting him.

On the other hand, the thought of hell, or of ECT specifically, can easily not have that effect. So it's fine to ignore it if it takes you away from God.

(I don't believe that MSLN gives reason to believe in ECT and from what I've read from other people as of today (25 May 2021), I'm fairly confident that neither does the Bible, although I should address that question in more detail at some point.)

I think we might have the effective attitude of "whatever our belief structure, we know that ECT doesn't exist". The thought of ECT is so horrible that if we took its possibility seriously, we would go crazy, and going crazy is a priori not an option for thinkers. Well-being trumps truth -- but we could even claim that truth actually always contains well-being. (Maybe this claim makes sense from this perspective -- to think, feel, and intuit in one whole means that the knowing itself is healed of its fragmentation, and healed knowing perhaps inherently creates and requires healthy knowers.) As an epistemological principle, we could claim that what actually is is always in line with truth, and thus not have to deal with ECT. Something like this seems to be what people may already believe implicitly, at least with respect to ECT.

It does seem odd to say that things which are too horrible to think about productively can't actually happen. We see horrible things happen, but maybe they're not horrible enough? Is there some point at which, as things

become more horrible to imagine, they cross a line and become impossible?

So it's not that the inherent horribleness of ECT makes it impossible, it's that when we know that it is impossible, we implicitly know that something else is true which for some reason allows horribleness to happen, but not ECT.

What kind of metaphysical reason could back that up? Certainly the God of MSLN could. Materialism could, as well. Probably other beings or realities could. Whatever it is, it has to be able and willing to (or "disposed to", in the case of impersonal reasons) exclude possibilities, and specifically exclude ECT. We might think that we know for certain that ECT-affirming Christianity and Islam aren't true, but that annihilation-affirming versions of them could be true.

The Proportionality of Truth

Another approach could be to say that belief in ECT causes us to disregard the proportionality of truth. Truth is always a thing which has its relationships. If we really took the possibility of ECT seriously, if it has a vanishingly small likelihood, then if it dominates all the rest of our thinking, we no longer see anything else. But that "anything else" is far more likely than the likelihood of ECT. So to know the truth, we have to take into account all the good of all the "anything else"'s, and those possible goods should not be ignored.

I think MSLN is likely -- I'm sure my credence will vary over time, but let's say today it is 90%. In 90% of possible futures, as long as I remain true to God, I will experience infinite (or, more accurately, everlasting) positive utility. What do I think my credence is of non-MSLN outcomes? As I see things now, there's a tight, perhaps 1 to 1 connection between the idea that reality only consists of consciousness, and MSLN. So what is my sense that there could be reality in addition to consciousness? Maybe 10%. Within that 10%, how much room is there for ECT? I don't really know, but I can try to guess, based on reasons why ECT might exist.

Maybe some kind of God or god-like being might ordain it (like the Stringent Invisible Flying Spaghetti Monster). He would use it to motivate people to care about things. Maybe a human society would. But one could also imagine a sadistic god.

Would humans want to torture other humans everlastingly? Maybe a few would, but what are the odds that they would take over the future, and be able to resurrect you to be part of their sadistic world? We have to imagine a world where people would even bother to remember whatever made you up, in order to faithfully reproduce you (to the extent that's possible) and then torture you (or that copy of you?). Are people (personal

beings) really that sadistic? Or would they get bored of that instead? Dystopian futures are certainly possible, but are they likely, and likely to affect you, and will they actually attain ECT? "Eternal" is a long time, and hard to guarantee, unless you have something like complete sovereignty over reality.

So something smaller than 10% allows for ECT, perhaps something very small, perhaps as high as 1%. (These numbers are made up, but reflect my subjective sense today.) I feel like 1% is as high as I would go, as an extremely safe assumption that would definitely exceed the real probability, so as to have a "safe" estimate of the risk.

One remaining filter is, if ECT exists, will I ever be subject to it? Or, in other words, what percentage of existing beings will ever be subject to it? This filter reduces the likelihood further. If ECT is meant as a punishment, then what if most beings simply adjust and stop meriting the punishment? If ECT is meant as sadism, how much do sadistic personal beings update their sadistic satisfaction to match large quantities of people tortured? Or are 1,000 tortured as gratifying as 1,000,000, so they don't bother with more than 1,000? To the extent that sadism is basically just a form of hedonism, why don't sadistic hedonists wirehead, or put themselves in experience machines? They could get away with that much more easily than actually torturing people, in the likely case that sadism is not popular.

Maybe some altruists who are not hedonists would be willing to torture people for all time for the tortured people's own good? To bring justice to someone is to take them seriously as a moral agent. These altruists would have to be unaware of the likelihood that MSLN is true. (As would any of these hypothetical people who might cause ECT.) To torture people who don't really deserve it seems like a risky thing to do, given that there might be a God who has to suffer whatever suffering you cause those you are punishing, who alone has the right to judge and punish people, knowing as he does the actual truth of who deserves punishment. If you exact torture with enough gusto or commitment, maybe you have hardened, since torture is not something that God inherently likes.

Is it likely that altruism will evolve into something that seeks to exact eternal conscious torment in the secular timeline? That sounds somewhat far-fetched, especially given the possibility of thinking of MSLN. But there is some possibility of it. Maybe a particularly worldly-minded religious movement could do it. But for every worldly-minded religious movement that might do it, there would be others that wouldn't.

To return to the subject of gods: Could a god (a superpowerful being) know that MSLN wasn't true? God can know that MSLN is true (if it is), simply by knowing that everything exists, fundamentally, by his will (evil follows from the wills of beings other than him, whose freedom he wills).

But other superpowerful beings, no matter how much they could find out, would probably be vulnerable to doubts that the God of MSLN might exist. This would lower such a god's confidence that it could torture us with impunity.

I think, again trying to make an extremely safe assumption, that at most 1% of all beings in an ECT-affected reality actually experience ECT. This assumes that ECT-infliction is not done throughout history, it is (exceedingly?) unlikely that anyone could bring back past people to be tortured in a future present, and when ECT-infliction is done, it generally doesn't affect the whole population, and the likelihood of it happening at all is somewhat low.

So if there's a 90% chance that as long as I am true to God (something which shouldn't be impossible as long as I keep caring about it) I will experience an everlastingly good outcome, and there is a 0.01% (1% of 1%) chance, at most, that I will experience ECT, then the approach of truth is to say I must take the 90% chance of good life forever as a substantial plenitude of potential well-being, which is overwhelmingly real to me, sustaining and building-up to think about, and the 0.01% chance of ECT, while real, does nothing to diminish the 90% of good that is promised. If the 90% can't diminish the 0.01%, the 0.01% can't diminish the 90%.

(Does this mean that God can bear what we consider unbearable forever if he has enough counterweighing good experience? And thus he could bear the pain of ECT for all eternity without relieving it? Here's a reason why not.)

If you can see things that way, I think thoughts of ECT aren't overwhelming. This is proceeding according to an epistemology of this kind of truth, of seeing what is dark but also seeing what is light, and seeing it as a whole. This can be contrasted with a kind of survival epistemology, which sees the avoidance of death and suffering as the criterion when processing reality (instead of looking at reality as a whole for its own sake), which thus focuses (or hyper-focuses) on threat.

This approach does not shut out voices, but adds them, still to accomplish a similar goal.

This may be the answer to the question "Does ECT dominate reason?". ECT does not dominate reason, because as long as we have a significantly more likely "eternal conscious rest" to contrast with it, we will take ECR more seriously than ECT, proportional to ECR's likelihood, no longer "mugged" by threat.

Bad voices close you off to reality

At the beginning of this post, I mentioned voices that say "you are

worthless, a failure, or doomed, or ones that tell you that this life is all that matters, or ones which are other people's misinterpretations of you, or their agendas for you". What's interesting about all these voices is that they close off access to other voices. If you're worthless, then you no longer access God's voice, the God who feels your pain and puts up with your sin -- real costs to him indicating real value. Likewise, how can you *know* that you are a failure, or doomed? Only if you close off your mind to possibilities, including the possibility (the likelihood) of God. When people misinterpret you, they tend to want to limit you, and when they have agendas for you, they want to commit you to some kind of commitment. All of these things try to get you to see just one part of reality.

Labels: #epistemology, #God, #math, #truth

First Thoughts About Time

%first-thoughts-about-time

Thursday, May 27, 2021

Epistemic status: very provisional.

Definitely see also Second Thoughts on Time.

In our experience, time is a part of consciousness. I don't see how conscious experience can change without time being part of consciousness. If everything that exists is consciousness, then time is part of consciousness.

I don't see a need to claim that God is timeless. Rather, his consciousness has a time to it, which is the "master clock" of the universe. It's possible to perceive the flow of time faster or slower, but if you enter a stretch of time at tG (God's time) = X, and exit at another point, tG = X + Y, what happens in the interval of length Y might get experienced at a different rate than God's experience of time, but you would enter the stretch of time at X and leave it at X + Y. You can imagine it like, if it takes longer than God's rate of experience over the interval length Y, it's like you traveled on a curved path to go from the same starting point to the same end point, where God traveled a straight line. Or, perhaps we travel over paths more quickly than God does, and it's his path that is more curved.

These are some quick, first thoughts about time, what I would like to argue. Maybe later I will think more about time and flesh them out.

Labels: #God, #note, #time

Gating Off Voices, Part 2

%gating-off-voices-part-2

Monday, May 31, 2021

After posting Gating Off Voices; Especially Ones That Speak of ECT, I realized that there were some more things to say on the subject.

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One thing I could have cleared up, had I noticed it, relates to this passage:

> If God doesn't exist, then hardening doesn't matter, so if hardening matters, it matters how we relate to God, and sometimes it is best to deliberately shut out some of the pathological voices in order to hear his better.

I think this is correct, if we take "hardening" in a narrow sense (only as that which is caused when we shut out the voice of God). But in a broader sense, deliberately shutting out a voice can be dangerous, whether God exists, or not. Could it be that by committing to God, or to a particular understanding of God, we are setting ourselves up for a bad outcome, perhaps the worst outcome possible? We might die young and in pain (the worst outcome according to materialism?) or we might go to a hell of annihilation or ECT (the worst outcome according to Christianity and Islam, assuming one of them is true and we are committed to the other). It might seem like the best position is to not commit to anything, but that is a kind of commitment in itself. It matters what we choose, so we should apply critical thinking, which can make various paths appear doubtworthy, and despite that tendency of critical thinking to produce doubt, we may choose a path. Even remaining in a state of "they're all doubtworthy so I won't choose" is doubtworthy.

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In the previous Gating Off Voices post, I laid out two approaches to bad voices: shut them down, or add other voices so that you have a better connection with the overall truth. Can these two be related?

Here's one account of belief: All we have access to are possibilities. That's what we see. But sometimes, as we add possibilities to our stock of things that we can imagine, simply to imagine a possibility causes other possibilities to seem untrue. It's like how God can't truly understand love and still choose to prefer evil.

So then, to know any truth, including by adding truths, could potentially

shut out bad voices. I think that adding truths as a tactic is more trusting, because with it, as you stop trusting truths, you tend to trust more truths at the same time. In fact, it is only by trusting more truths that you can shut out any, on this model.

Labels: #fear, #note, #rationality, #trust

Witness Epistemology

%witness-epistemology

Monday, May 31, 2021

Witness epistemology: "I know things as a witness, not as a being pretending to omniscience. This is what I see. I do not know if it is anything more than my perception." This admirably humble and limited point of view is unpopular. Why? It just feels wrong? It doesn't lead us to seek the truths we need to survive or to do what needs to be done for others?

Those are possibilities. Another is that it may lend itself to solipsism. Solipsism is not an attractive view to most people, and things that can go down a slippery slope to solipsism may be suspect. If suspect enough, we "know" them to simply be untrue. In this case, "knowing" is a kind of shutting down of the ability to believe, to harden oneself against pathological beliefs. So to say "I know things as a witness" is to say "I know what I experience, and only that". All we need to add to that to get to solipsism is "Somehow the only things that can be are the things that are knowable", which philosophically sounds suspicious, but which we might "know" to be true, or feel a strong bias toward believing as true.

Surely, following something like "whereof one cannot speak, one must be silent", we can only talk about what we know of. Or at least, that sounds like it makes sense on some level. But then we like to make the leap that what we don't talk about, or oughtn't talk about, doesn't exist. We don't have a right to concern ourselves about it, so we should live as though (or pretend that) it doesn't exist. And so if we are fully epistemically modest, we seem to tend to have to be solipsists.

Labels: #epistemology, #note, #psychology

"Whereof One Cannot Speak" (Without Degrading...)

%whereof-one-cannot-speak-without

Monday, May 31, 2021

I found this blog post from another blogger when I was trying to find "whereof one cannot speak..." to use in this post. He makes the point that Wittgenstein (source of the quote) initially was interpreted as saying that since we don't know that God, beauty, etc. exist in as rigorous a way as scientific things, that it was meaningless to try talking about them. But that Wittgenstein's later notes say more that these realities exist, but that talking about them degrades them.

If we find that talking about God or beauty (etc.) degrades them, then we perhaps do not talk about them or act on them, and to the extent that our epistemology, the way we trust so that things are real to us, is practical, we don't trust them as much as if we could have spoken of them and acted on them in some way. Does God want to be taken as an unspeakable mystery? Or would he rather we approached him as according to our concepts as they are, though they make him into a cheap formula to us? I think the way of relationship is somewhere in the middle. A trustworthy, mature spousal relationship (I would guess) is a good model for a good interpersonal relationship. I like what Ursula LeGuin suggests, about how spouses can cross an abyss of difference very casually, when they relate. I would say that they speak words to each other, which mean something different to each of them, and yet basically the same.

I would assume that in any spousal relationship, there is both the relating to what is known and to what is unknown. If we approach each other with respect, we allow each other to be what we are, and this lets us trust each other without fully understanding each other. If we relate to God with respect, we can use the words we know to use about him -- and they are the same words he uses to speak to us about himself or any other conceivable topic, although he understands them in a somewhat, but not fatally, different way than we do.

Labels: #beauty, #God, #Ludwig Wittgenstein, #relationships, #respect, #Ursula K. LeGuin

Size of God

%size-of-god

Tuesday, June 1, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional.

Traditionally God is assumed to be of infinite "size", where "size" can be cashed out as power, speed, energy, capacity, or something like that. Under the traditional view, God's mind contains a literal infinity, the awareness of all possible thoughts (each one of the real numbers is there, and all the possible interrelationships between the real numbers, and so on).

I don't know what the Bible says about this -- whether it commits us to that view or not. Also, I am unsure what to think, in terms of MSLN. I want to say that there are no actual infinities. In which case, God is not infinite.

If that is the case, then perhaps the size of what can be created and what can be thought is limited by God's "size". The universe may be extraordinarily large and detailed, and also, in each communication between God and creature, enormous numbers of complex simantic words are related, so that appearances can appear to be of what they are. And God communicates with an extraordinary number of creatures. God shows us what there is and also knows what we may potentially see, what may follow from one presentation of a simantic word (the barking dog may become a friendly dog -- two parts of the meaning of the simantic word that is that dog).

So it looks as though the size of God is very large -- I couldn't quantify it, but as a proxy, maybe someone could calculate the "size" of a computer that could simulate every detail of our physical world, all our perceptions, and all the interrelationships between them which are of practical, aesthetic, or otherwise personal significance.

This possible limit on the size of God would then be a limit on how many people could be created, something relevant to the rest view of population ethics.

Labels: #God, #math, #note

Phenomenology of Hardening

%phenomenology-of-hardening

Wednesday, June 2, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional.

I realize that I've been adding more to the idea of hardening, or finding that I have to clarify issues with it. The topic is important, so that's justified. But I wish that I had figured all of this out before I started writing about it. Normally, a blog is a good medium for working on thoughts. But if you say something that concerns risk, it seems good to have a finished product before you say things that might mislead or alienate people, for being incomplete presentations of a concept. However, since I have so few readers (as far as I know), perhaps I have time in which to develop what I have to say.

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What would it be like to harden yourself? How would it feel on the inside? Well, *you* have to reject God and cease to listen to his voice. So you would be conscious of rejecting God. You would make the decision irrevocably. You would reject with your whole being. Buber said evil is never done in a whole-souled way, and I can see something to that here. You have to violate a part of yourself to make this decision. But *you* can do that, and if you harden, then that is what you do.

What would it feel like to be in a state of being hardened? I'm not sure. One possibility is that you just wouldn't care that you were hardened, or what God cared about. This seems like a likely phenomenology of being hardened. Another might be that you don't care about those things but pretend to yourself that you do care, knowing that you pretend. I'm less sure that that kind of thing happens, but if it did, I think it could be a case of hardening, because the self-deception could be deliberate enough and knowing enough.

Much of what I am concerned about when I think about myself hardening is getting into ease. Ease can lead to a kind of nihilism on a deep level. But I haven't hardened yet, if I am indifferent. I may be in a state of danger, but I haven't made the fatal step.

Is it possible to have made that decision and then forgotten you did so? If you did so, you wouldn't care about the question. If you feel that you don't

care, but *you* choose to turn to God for salvation, then you weren't irrevocably hardened.

I don't think very many people have consciously and knowingly rejected God in this life in an irrevocable way. The next life (the Millennium), will last a long, but finite time, and toward the end of it is when I would expect to see the most hardenings actually happen. What we do now, at any point along the way, can affect how close we get to that possibility. Whatever sins or idols we love more than God, that we hold onto, are things that could lead us into hardening someday. But, the door is not shut. Unless you know that the door is shut, since you decided deliberately and irrevocably to shut it, and don't care that it is shut.

Labels: #life choices, #psychology

Therapeutic Truth

%therapeutic-truth

Thursday, June 3, 2021

Sometimes we believe things because of the process of therapy. If a therapist says "try thinking of your inner life as a bunch of people who take on different roles, see if that helps your problem" (what Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy is based on), and it does help, you probably won't be absolutely certain that you have a bunch of people who make you up as a community, but your credence in that will rise, and you may trust as though that belief were absolutely true.

Similarly (though this isn't exactly therapy), if a therapist like Freud says "your religious belief is created by a subconscious mechanism of wish fulfillment" and, when you hear of that, you think "it can't be true, can it? Can it? ... It must...", as though after thinking about it, you see that it is true, and then you lose your belief in God, obviously not founded on faculties aimed at truth-seeking, then that loss of belief can be taken to show that your religious belief was founded in wish fulfillment. (Was it really? Was it *only* founded in wish fulfillment? You did want it to be true as you would any good thing. Well, since you lost your belief, the therapy worked, so the ideas involved in the therapy must have been true, or "therapeutically true", as much as the notion that there are many people in you because IFS works.)

To be fair (to therapists), beliefs produced through the therapeutic process can be helpful (the goal of therapy), or even true, if the therapist is responsible to the truth.

We tend to believe whoever heals us, whoever changes us, or has decisive psychological power over us (often, whoever abuses us), whether or not they really know what they're talking about.

Labels: #epistemology, #mental health, #psychology, #trust

MSLN Spiritual Warfare

%msln-spiritual-warfare

Friday, June 4, 2021

One of the consequences of believing that evil spiritual beings negotiated with God for the world to be evil (as a condition on willing temptation to exist) (which may be the best explanation for why there is so much evil in the world despite God being good, and is the one favored by MSLN) is that we wonder, what exactly did those evil beings negotiate, and to what extent do they interact with our world?

First, I want to say that if any evil beings do interact with our world, the belief that they exist, and the belief that they don't exist, are both things they would use against us. These beings want to drive us crazy, torment us, and deceive us. But that very thought can drive people crazy, torment them, and deceive them. It is good to read about deceptive truths, pathological thoughts and emotions, epiconcepts, seeing Spiritually, and gating off voices in this context. Also, any discussion of evil makes it possible to wonder if people are evil. I think it's possible that there are evil people, but it can be dangerous to identify people as being evil -- don't sell yourself out to that belief. Evil beings get their will done when people believe other people are evil when they are not. Some readers may want to rule out the possibility of there being evil beings because such a belief could be associated with a traditional religious belief in the devil. They may look on such a belief as a fear tactic, used by religious people to control people. If there are evil beings, then the fear tactic furthers the aims of evil beings, as does the avoiding of the fear tactic to the extent that we rule out the possibility of there being evil beings.

If you can, see evil, but don't fear evil. The power of evil can be reduced by seeing it without fear. If evil frightens you, you can rely on God to keep you safe.

The good news, from MSLN's point of view, is that all being follows from God, and God brings about a completely legitimate world in the end. Evil is real and substantial but is parasitic on good. Evil can never win in the end, at least, it can't destroy God and anyone who remains with God. Evil might succeed in pulling people away from God. We are born with God -- something has to overcome that starting point for us to be lost. Though evil is given a certain latitude to affect the world, one shouldn't forget that God also has latitude to affect the world. Generally people are not on the side of the evil beings, although what they are on the side of may turn out to further the purposes of the evil beings. The evil beings are limited and only one side of the war.

To answer the questions from above ("What exactly did evil beings negotiate? How much do they interact with the world?"), the bad news that is most certain, from an MSLN point of view is: There is some evil that can have an overall good effect, all things considered, but it's debatable which evils do, and it's clear enough (to me) that there is such a thing as gratuitous evil. This evil has nothing to do with human conscious choice. Natural disasters, parasites and other disease-causing organisms, the drives toward aggression and hypersexuality (or other very common biological sources of temptation), genetic-based mental illness, and so on clearly qualify for this category. These are things that we would have to pin on God himself, and in a sense, he does bring them into the world, but not by his own will. These were negotiated to be part of the world by the evil beings, as a condition for them working for God by willing our temptation.

Beyond that, MSLN doesn't have a lot of answers. So I will discuss the range of possibilities as I see it. The reader may be able to form an opinion, based on what they see, as to where in the range of possibilities the answer likely lies.

It does seem likely that if I were a group of evil beings able to have a say in how reality was going to turn out, I would include a provision for my kind to be able to do direct work.

This work might be seen in how cultures are guided. For instance, Descartes was inspired by a set of dreams to reform all knowledge according to a rationalist project (ctrl-f "dreams" to find the reference in the preceding link). Where did those dreams come from? What effect did they have? It certainly pushed history forward. While Descartes himself seems to have been a believing Christian, his intellectual project led to a lot of atheism in the years that followed. I can see God and the evil beings both wanting to get something out of rationalism. Rationalism would then be a site for spiritual warfare, a contested ground. But suppose that rationalism favors evil more than good. Then Descartes' dreams may likely have been the product of an evil spirit, offering him a tempting vision, which he trusted.

How many great minds do not work from inspiration, and where does inspiration come from, except from spirits, good, bad, or (more or less) neutral? Certainly I would expect a materialist reader to think that there are things other than "spirits" at play. But from the MSLN point of view, whatever is, follows from somebody's conscious choice. So a flash of inspiration, if it ever doesn't completely seem like you, if it "comes to you", may well have been devised by some other being. Creative or scientific people are conduits or receptacles for spirit voices, in addition to being people who can create or discover in their own right. Spiritual influence can be a good thing -- it may be a way that God influences the culture. But it can also be a bad thing, or, probably more likely, a contested thing.

Evil beings can work through people who are diagnosed with mental illnesses, producing some or all of their hallucinations and moods. Psychiatric medicines would then block the power of evil beings -- the evil beings consenting to this, I suppose, with some consolation that that established way things are done may promote the view that all mental phenomena come from the nonspiritual world.

They can also work through people with personality disorders -- the "algorithms" that drive such people might really just be evil spirits who hijack them. Such hijacked people look like they are evil, but don't intend or even remember or realize what they are doing. They make themselves look like enemies when, sometimes, they are not. Or they only have a mild or moderate enmity, which is amplified by the spirits that use them. Evil beings like getting humans to hate each other. Probably they are involved in what goes on in politics. The great scandals are probably driven in part or in whole by evil beings.

Evil beings, when they work in people's minds, work within the psychological laws which people's thoughts follow and which can be measured in the brain. Within whatever extent people can express free will outside the skein of deterministic events, there can be the free-willed action of evil beings.

Evil beings can possess people, have them in their power for years on end. They don't necessarily use people all the time, nothing that obvious. But their victims' minds are held captive, and their victims suffer attacks, and themselves are the conduits for evil into other people's lives.

Evil beings can work with people symbiotically. People can have evil intentions which are aligned with the evil beings. If you have a sinful heart at what you think is a small scale, evil beings can work with that and amplify your effect in other people. Your sinfulness is a foothold, and evil beings do not want you to repent. They want you either to ignore your sinfulness, to call it something other than sin, or to lose hope that you can really repent. And you may not always favor what the evil beings want. You may go back and forth between having good intentions and bad, and this alternation allows you to do deeper work for the evil beings, higher on the hierarchy of betrayal.

Not only is your sinfulness something that can be something that is aligned with evil beings, but also your enmity with God (if seen as separate from your sinfulness). Both, your enmity with God in intention, and your enmity with God in fact.

While we may be impressed by suffering, insanity, confusion and the hatred we have for each other, the most destructive thing evil beings can do is turn us against God. They can do this directly, by tempting us or turning us way from anti-temptations. Or culturally -- when we are

deceived by them, we spread the lie that opposes the belief that God is worthy of our obedience and trust, either by consciously opposing such a belief, or by adopting it but behaving in a way unworthy of that profession of faith. Evil beings try to shut up and discredit people who follow God and who try to proclaim God's glory and the need for God.

How widespread is this evil? Certainly there are obvious cases, but if the goal of the evil beings is partially to deceive, aren't quiet deceptions better than loud ones? So it may be that in subtle ways, we are being lied to, and don't realize it.

Evil beings can work on small scales or in coordinated actions on large scales. Leaders are especially targeted, because of their disproportionate effect on other people. Evil beings prefer to hide, at least in Western cultures.

It could be that all of the evil beings are unified. It is also possible that they have factions or political parties, or even schismatic movements. Evil beings may oppose each other, while still intending to oppose God. I'm not sure we would see evidence of this, but we might.

God can certainly interact with all beings just for being the mind through which all beings experience. But how can the evil beings get around to so many of us? One possibility is that just as human persons are created and brought into the world, so are evil beings. Maybe God creates them, under contract from the evil beings, or maybe they create their own. God is the original person, the original source of all personality, but evil beings may still be able to create on their own, out of the personality that originally came from him.

So there may be enough evil beings for all of us to be affected by their specific work.

Again, these are speculations, which can fit into the non-biblical parts of MSLN, but you can see how much you think your experiences bear them out.

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How could this connect to the Bible? In the Bible, sometimes "the devil" or "Satan" is referred to. The devil seems to be singular, as though there is one demigod that is parasitic on God. But there is also mention of multiple smaller demons. So there are plural evil beings in the Bible, just as in the non-biblical parts of MSLN discussed above.

Labels: #evil, #God, #mental health, #psychology, #spiritual, #spiritual bondage

Forgetting the War

%forgetting-war

Saturday, June 5, 2021

Sometimes we forget, or choose not to see, or never were aware of, the war between God and Satan over each person -- other people, and ourselves. When we are in that state, it seems like life is normal, "laminar", explicable, common-sensical, and we take things easy. However, when we do that, because we don't see, we can have consequences in the war that we are not aware of.

Labels: #evil, #God, #note

God's Anger and the Atonement

%gods-anger-and-atonement

Saturday, June 5, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional.

What is the nature of God's anger, in MSLN?

Why would God be angry? One reason is because God values his creatures highly and doesn't like to see us disvaluing / disrespecting them. (Respect is inherently part of love.) We like to think that love would love us (approve of us) out of an abundance of love, but it is also possible that unless we are the most innocent and/or oppressed creatures, love would be angry at us out of an abundance of love, for what we do to those most innocent and/or oppressed creatures. This deviation from love/respect/valuing is (perhaps) the essence of being out of tune with God, of violating legitimacy.

I think God might become angry if we disrespect him or disvalue him. It's odd to think of a loving being caring about its honor, and perhaps God does not. However, God does care about the truth, and we sometimes lie to ourselves out of disrespect of him. God is worthy, and to not respect him is to not be in tune with the truth. And disrespect is something that in itself is angering, no matter who the object of it is. So I would think that God would be more angry when we disrespect his creatures, who are weaker than us, and than him, but still angry when we disrespect him. I would think that God regards ego respect less highly than survival respect.

God, knowing everything that can be known, knows what he's doing when he is angry with us, and because he is legitimacy (he bears all the burdens of the world he created), he is fully justified in being angry. But we are not. Anger may be a helpful thing, one which, from a consequentialist perspective, is sometimes better than not being angry. But it is dangerous and we exceed our rights when we are angry. Sometimes anger has little or no redeeming value.

So far I've been trying to talk about God's response to present states of our hearts (when we disvalue/disrespect/fail to love). But just as we can be angry over the past, so can God be. How can that anger be alleviated? God can't experience rest if he is angry.

One possible answer is that the injustice of past violations of legitimacy /

sins can be alleviated (God's mind healed so that he is no longer angry) by there being some kind of atonement, some kind of payment for transgressions. We might think this strange. We find ourselves able to forgive people without there being an atonement.

Forgiveness (a letting go of anger) might only take the other person coming to see things as we do, which validates our point of view. Sometimes we are angry only because we are invalidated. The person doesn't matter, simply the lie that they told about us or about life, which we somehow can't refute unless they somehow undo the lie, which was told in a past behavior, which violated us.

Or perhaps it could come about that we simply forget the other person, take them less seriously in some ways. We have the virtue of forgetting.

Can God forget the past? If not, then it always exists, as fresh as ever. I'm not sure why God wouldn't forget the past. Certainly he must cease to experience our past experiences in an omnisubjective way, in order to experience rest. So probably he can and perhaps already does forget some aspects of the past.

Do we think of God as someone who knows the truth? That seems like something we would expect of God. The truth might include the past. Not a past out of proportion to the present, and not isolated parts of the past, as we experience due to trauma or bitterness. But a truth that can't discount past sins any more than it can discount present repentance. Perhaps, just as we possess an intellectual though not experiential knowledge of what is, God does as well, and this intellectual awareness can never forget. In the Bible, "the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever" (Revelation 14:11) -- the memory never fades, but does not become anything more than a memory, and does not cause God unbearable pain, as the fully omnisubjective knowledge / experience of the past would.

God can forget the past (cause it to cease to exist by not being aware of it, as long as as it's not held onto by any of his creatures), but not whatever facts are needed to explain the present, that which is part of the concept and the simantic words of presently existing beings. The sensory experience of unbearable pain must involve unbearable pain, but no concept necessarily involves any unbearable feelings. It is always (I think?) possible to conceptually grasp something without feeling unbearable pain. The conceptual grasp could theoretically be separated from any unbearable pain that for whatever reason might accompany it. It might be necessary to perform some kind of work to make that happen, but it is possible.

Perhaps there can be something unbearable about the intellectual remembering of past violations. This seems true to (human) life. It seems possible that God could let go of past injustice if there was some kind of

atonement. I think this makes more sense if you think of the "need for justice" as being some kind of body part, like a broken arm, which a person needs to deal with, as opposed to something that flows deeply from who they are. So God has to deal with his "need for justice organ" and sends his son as the healing sacrifice of atonement.

It's fair to see God as being obsessed with justice, in a way that we are not. It may be the case that if you're really in tune with reality, you should be obsessed with justice. Truth is reality as a whole, and injustice is a problem with reality as a whole, how things don't add up. It may be that to be a (literally or effectively) infinite being, in tune with reality down to the finest details, or the bare metal of it, you have to be obsessive. And obsessiveness is not an evil thing, thus not incompatible with being God -- albeit something that if taken to a strict / real degree has the potential to produce unbearable suffering.

In that case, God's responsibility to / indexing to / connection to justice could be so intense that he couldn't get over his anger at us for our disvaluings of his creatures (and him) which we did in the past, and thus adjust his concept of us enough that he could forgive us. This would make it hard for him to get close to us on a personal level. So he would seek some way to help him overcome his anger, following from his obsessive connection to things being the way they were supposed to be. He could send his son to die, to pay the price of his justice, allowing him to be free from his need for our sins to be paid for. Apparently, no therapy was available for God but, like in the case of someone undergoing body modification (surgery, hormone therapy), to treat the mental condition of gender dysphoria, it was possible to reshape external reality in a therapeutic way, through the Son's sacrifice.

It makes a bit more sense to me, when thinking about the atonement, to think "yes, God sent his son to die, but it was really his son's idea". Just like "yes, God presents the simantic word of temptation to us, but it was really Satan's idea." In either case, God might have known that it was necessary, and set up the situation in which Satan or the Son would take initiative, but they were needed to do something he couldn't do, by their willpower. I feel like if I were in God's place, understanding that I needed to heal my obsession with injustice by seeing an innocent sacrifice die in place of all the guilty creatures, it wouldn't heal that obsession if it was fully my will that the sacrifice go. The sacrifice would have to volunteer. I couldn't just "let go" of people's sins -- that wouldn't require a sacrifice. My (if I were God) perfectly effective will could easily secure that without a sacrifice. Something would have to go beyond my will, and that would be the willingness of the sacrifice.

In the Bible, Jesus says "Father, let this cup pass from me. But not my will, but yours be done". To be fair, this sounds like a flat contradiction of what I just said. It sounds like the Father was the source of will, and the Son

simply had to learn to submit. But I can imagine that the healing began with the Son's volunteering to die, and that it simply had to be seen through someday to carry through the intention. Jesus, as a human, really was willing to die, when he said "not my will, but yours be done". He was faltering in his intentions, but ultimately Jesus died doing what he set out to do, even if, in a way that might be familiar to humans such as us, he was terrified by the actual prospect of doing what he really wanted to do, and had to be helped by an iron commitment, based in a connection with someone outside himself. Then, once Jesus died, God could look back and say "It's over, it's all paid for, I (and a large part of reality) are healed."

So then, there is a perhaps intense poignancy about the Son dying for the Father. We have tended to focus on what it meant for us, how we benefited, but there is more to the story, I think.

Labels: #Christianity, #God, #mental health, #psychology

Producing the Sense of Trustworthiness

%producing-sense-of-trustworthiness

Sunday, June 6, 2021

To trust and to find trustworthy are very closely linked. One leads to the other naturally. You might trust someone, not because they are trustworthy, but because you need to trust someone. Then, because you trust them, you come to believe that they are trustworthy. This may not reflect the reality of that person. That sense of trustworthiness may linger, even after you stop trusting them -- and maybe that lingering sense of trustworthiness is you trusting them to some degree, despite yourself.

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Are people trustworthy just because they have good intentions? Not necessarily. If we establish between two people that one of them has good intentions, that in itself may produce trust that exceeds what that person warrants. This tends to lead to betrayal.

People are more essentially their intentions, rather than their effects. God sees the person / the intentions, but we see the effects.

If we assess people on intentions, then we talk about what we don't know directly. We have to guess. But if we assess people based on them as life realities, then we are talking about what affects us, and we know that very well. So we can avoid judging people (intentions) while being able to filter people out for being the conduits and figureheads of untrustworthy life realities.

Jesus says not to judge. I don't know that assessing someone as untrustworthy is never one of the things Jesus cautions against when he says not to judge. But it seems like we do have to filter people out of our lives sometimes, and do so because we have some reason that we are aware of. If that counts as judging, then a more minimalist judging (as untrustworthy rather than ill-willed + untrustworthy) seems best.

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The good that people do us produces the sense that it is trustworthy, because it is trustworthy. But there can be a kind of "deceptive trustworthiness" (in parallel with deceptive truth), when the good that people do us sets us up to be betrayed later or on a higher level.

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All of these ways in which we can come to have a sense that someone else is trustworthy, beyond what is warranted, are natural, and we don't necessarily know in advance the difference between (on the one hand) 1) trusting people because we need them, and it's fine, 2) coming to believe someone has good intentions, and they do, and it's good to trust them for it, and 3) someone does something genuinely good to us in itself, and nothing bad will come of it; and (on the other hand) the darker scenarios discussed above. When you enter into a relationship, how can you know how things will turn out? It wouldn't be worthwhile to never trust anyone.

However, the above insights may be helpful in dealing with people who are no longer in your life, or whom you already have reason to not trust, to help you disentangle yourself from the bonds of unworthy trust. Also, if you find yourself trying really hard to 1) provide for other people's needs, 2) establish that you have good intentions, or 3) do good things for them or to them, you may be working beyond the limit of your abilities, or of your trustworthiness, and you should reconsider what you're doing and perhaps reconsider being in the relationship you're in.

Labels: #Jesus, #psychology, #relationships, #trust

Conversational Presence of God Derived From Natural Theology

%conversational-presence-of-god-derived

Sunday, June 6, 2021

If you happen to find arguments like simantism or legitimism persuasive, you may find yourself feeling that God exists when things are meaningful or really a certain way or the way they should be. That feeling may be the apprehension of a dry fact, perhaps something solid. To believe more in accordance with what the arguments show, it makes sense to find God himself speaking to you when those facts come up -- you are in the conversational presence of God, God being a person to you. Perhaps, in the conversational presence of someone, that is when a person is truly a person to you, even if they are silent.

Labels: #God, #note, #relationships

Epistemology of Common Sanity

%epistemology-of-common-sanity

Sunday, June 6, 2021

One practical epistemology is the epistemology of sanity. To act as though you believe, or to encourage yourself to believe, so that you do what is likely to bring you success on the scale of your own personal life, both in terms of mental and physical health, as well as socially and materially.

It is "insane" (by this definition) to try to do something that is unlikely to work but which has high expected value, because you are likely to fail, no matter how good the outcome would be if you succeeded, even if it is in some sense rational to pursue it (the likelihood of outcome times value of outcome exceeds that of your other options).

Also, you should do things that appear reasonable to other people, because it is unpleasant to try to do things that do not. So sanity is partially defined by your culture, whether your culture is benefited by the "wisdom of crowds" or held back by historical collective traumas, or has established traditions which are good, or bad, in their effects, or whatever else goes into culture.

"Sanity" in the sense given in this post could also be called "common sanity", what would be sane if there was a one-size-fits-all definition of what was sane to believe. There are no special people according to this. Does it make sense to think that you're exceptional? The odds are always against it, by definition. What is sane is to take care of yourself, and caring people, or helping professionals, will see the value of this "common sanity" but filter out the value of the great reward which a "high expected value" person might seek.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #life choices, #mental health

The Subconscious Self

%the-subconscious-self

Tuesday, June 8, 2021

Is there such a thing as the subconscious mind? We have the Freudian view, which says that there is, and it's you. You have a subconscious element. Opposed to that is the MSLN view, which says that there may be, and it's not you. You do not have a subconscious element.

The Freudian view is verified with therapy, or something like it. We feel tensions inside us which can be alleviated if we think of ourselves as having a subconscious self.

The MSLN view follows from first principles. Everything is caused by consciousness, by conscious will. So there is no subconscious, just consciousnesses of which we do not have direct access (we only have direct access to our own, while God, in his omnisubjectivity, has access to all of our consciousnesses). Other conscious beings can have power over us, can use us. But we are not them.

We make choices, and then forget that we made choices, but still live embodying choices. In that way, we can be out of touch with who we really are. (And maybe that could be said to be the subconscious element that really is you, after all. But even your past self is somewhat not the same person as you.) On the other hand, sometimes the things that appear to be our choices were really chosen by someone else, by some spirit, or by God, or by the outworking by God of psychological laws.

Some things which we perceive in our experience bodies, which we don't choose, clearly don't follow from our past choices. We never willed to experience those experiences. The MSLN view is that they do not follow from any choices that we made, but were produced by something other than us. And many of the things we experience which were caused by past choices were only partially caused by us. I might choose to throw a ball onto a sloped street, but though it followed from my choice, I would not choose where it stopped rolling, or what happened to it after that. God (and other beings) caused all the rest of that chain of consequences. I might need to take responsibility for the ball that I threw, and for the fact that it could have consequences, but not assume that I was the one who caused (or was wholly responsible for) those consequences.

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The therapeutic understanding that there is such a thing as the subconscious self may be effective in the same way that taking a pill can

be effective in treating a mental illness. The pill, speaking ordinaristically, is a little capsule filled with some substance which through magic has some effect on the spirits in the mind. The substance has little to no literal resemblance to the spirits. If I recall correctly from the last time it happened accidentally, if I open up one of my lithium capsules, I see some white powder. Also, I have found that lithium tastes foul. What connection does whiteness, foul-tastingness, or powderiness have to do with mood regulation? And yet the capsules do have a connection. There is some sort of arrangement that the "potion" sign (the capsule) has something to do with psychological reality. So it may be with the idea of the subconscious self, as used therapeutically.

Psychoactive medications have side effects. The side effect of the belief in the subconscious self is to ignore the spiritual world, including both evil spirits and God, and also to cause people to be uncertain of who they really are. The MSLN view does still allow you to be uncertain (about your past self, which is in a sense you), but if you find yourself doing something that is out of character for you, it may not really be you. And you are not some physical process that rules you in the dark with consciousness as a veneer on top, but rather you just are your consciousness, and your past consciousness.

Labels: #mental health, #psychology, #what is a person?

Legitimism Without Atonement

%legitimism-without-atonement

Wednesday, June 9, 2021

Here is another angle on legitimism. (You may want to read that post to make sense of this, if you haven't already.)

Legitimism requires that if legitimacy is capable of bearing the burdens it lays on those whom it creates, it must. If God is infinite (very big, very fast, even if not truly infinite -- or even infinite, if infinity can be actual?), then he can experience all the experiences that any beings experience. And in fact, he should, simply in order to have metaphysical contact with all beings. (And in order to be able to speak the simantic word of "all things" to us.) So it is easy to see how he could literally bear the burden of each thing that occurs to any and all of his creatures. However, he could not experience what it was like to experience all these things and not simultaneously experience everything else that exists.

I don't want to take away from God's firsthand experience of what each person experiences. It is literally as intense as whatever each person experiences. It would have to be. God would have to experience the tunnel vision each of us experiences, where we only know what we know. That's what it means to experience literally the same experiences we experience. And yet he would experience the rest of his experiences as well.

By knowing the bigger picture, though he really would experience exactly what his creatures experienced, he would know more, and on some level that would enable him to have distance from their experiences that they don't have. He would really know enough of what was going on to be justified in making the laws of the universe (in the sense of knowing how everything relates to every other existing thing), and he would also be justified by having the disposition to bear our burdens to as great an extent as he could, but one could say that there is a missed opportunity, which he can't take, to be a creature and nothing but a creature.

If it is possible for God to share the formation of the laws of the universe with a finite being, then that being can live an ordinary human life, without the distance that comes from greater awareness, and that finite being could then play a part in upholding legitimacy. It would be by his will as well as God's that the laws of the universe were formed. The two would authoritatively assent to the laws, and thus give them their legitimacy, and thus they would both be God (in the legitimist sense, of

the highest being, most worthy, most authoritative, deciders of the way things are, the single source of legitimacy, made up as it seems it must by more than one person). If it were possible for God to co-create with a finite being, he should, in order to enable there to be a member of legitimacy who could experience the finite element of creaturely life. Since he can, and should, he did.

However, now we come to the question, how many finite lives must be lived by the finite co-creating member of God (the Son)? Will the Son live every human's life? Or just one? The argument for just one could be that for the sake of justice, the Son could only die once. As a member of legitimacy, the Son does no injustice and does not deserve death, but could die for others' injustices. Having paid for them once, he couldn't die again, since he would be paying for nothing, and thus there would be no redeeming value for the extra injustice of each further death he experienced. This is something that fits into biblical Christianity, and I want to support that option (as I have begun to in this post on the Atonement.)

However, I think it's possible that the story given above, which would limit the number of deaths that the Son could undergo, could possibly not be true. I think if someone "entered the MSLN path" from a secular beginning, they might not see justice and Atonement as necessarily following from the founding principles of MSLN. So legitimism could be seen as having a more, and less, biblical interpretation. The less biblical one might find some other limit to the number of deaths that Jesus would undergo, but I can't think of one right now. So instead I will try to account for how the Son could experience the lives of each person (or animal, assuming as is reasonable that they are "minds" in a Berkeleian sense, or even in some sense "personal beings"), as a finite being with as little extra context beyond what each creature experiences in their life, for as many creatures as possible.

The Son could share subjectivity with the stream of consciousness that is identical to that of a creature, unable to do anything to affect what happens in it. It would be like watching a movie, in total detail (or even more so, entering an experience machine). He would do this for each of the billions of creatures that have ever lived or ever will live. Because the Son is finite, he would experience each one in order, one after another. This process would take a finite amount of time, and might be compressed. So the Son might experience them all in a second of the "master clock", even if it took him billions of years in his subjective time. In this way, he would be able to bear the burden of all beings.

(13 June 2021, update: I think it unlikely now that there could be a real difference in rates of subjective experience. So I would say that it really may take Jesus billions of years to go through all those lives, not compressed into one second. Perhaps all other beings would sleep and not

notice the passage of the billions of years, when only the Father and Son would be awake.)

In order for him to still be himself while experiencing this, he would still have to add something to his experience of the creature while he experienced it. There is no substitute for being yourself and nothing more. But he need not be aware of the full range of knowledge normally available to him. When he is experiencing what an atheist experiences, he might be an atheist, or doubt the existence of God to as great a degree as possible for him, due to the perspective of the atheist, which does not trust the appearances of God in life. He might not know anything more than what they know, from birth, besides whatever bare amount is necessary for the Son to be the Son. So he could bear our burdens in a finite though still not identical way, and, given the requirements of legitimacy to have the maximal willingness to bear the burdens of those under its rule, he should and thus does.

But it is possible that you could say that the Son doesn't really die if all he's doing is "watching movies". Perhaps if he lives his own life on earth, and no one else's, then he can be fully immersed in that life and experience death the same way we do. But when he shares a life, he may always find some distance from the shared life, as when we watch even the most immersive movies, the distance which enables him to remain being himself as he "watches".

In that case, if the Atonement only limits his deaths to one, he could still "co-live" multiple lives. He could know the finite lives of each being (and would, for the sake of legitimacy), to the greatest extent possible, and thus would experience all of our lives. This makes fairly literal what Jesus says when he says "what you do to the least of these, you do to me".

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In the case where we assume the Atonement and justice do not obtain such that the Son's deaths are limited to one, then how many times would the Son have to die in order to bear our burdens? He would have to experience his own life and death by himself, to understand that aspect of human experience. There is something unique in human experience of living your own life and no one else's. He would also experience each of our unique ways of living and experiencing death. Would the Son need to keep living lives and dying by himself? He would have already experienced all the uniqueness of our lives and deaths (by having co-lived them as described above). But would he have to experience them for himself, without being separate from our consciousness? Maybe. Perhaps the Son lives and dies lives, by himself, which are similar to every other human life, so as to experience all of them, for and by himself. I think (for now) as long as the number of these lives are finite, I don't see a problem with affirming this.

We could say that each simantic word (of the extraordinary, but finite, number of possible simantic words), which humans experience in their lives, mostly have already been experienced by the Son and the Father as they "coined" them before bringing humans into consciousness. But to whatever extent they attain a new meaning, and to whatever extent they can be experienced as a single human in a limited lifetime, the Son could experience each word as such.

One problem, though, is that if the simantic words have not been modified until after humans live their lives, then the Son would not be able to live them until after those lives were over. But many lives will continue forever, and presumably simantic words will keep evolving or being refined for all eternity. The Son can't bear the burden of all of our existences.

However, one could argue that the burden of legitimacy is different from the freedom of it. The burden will all be lifted when all sin is gone. The way things should be is liberation for those in tune with trustworthiness, who can therefore trust. (Trust and trustworthiness are liberation.) The way things should be is a burden when it demands that we change or that we pay a price, because we are out of tune with trustworthiness.

In any case, if it is impossible for the Son to not bear a burden, then he does not have to. Legitimacy arises (at least, this is a necessary condition) from the disposition, as far as is possible, to bear the burdens you levy on others when you make a law.

Labels: #empathy, #God, #Jesus, #trust

Anger, Anxiety, Complacency, Passion in Intellectual Believing

%anger-anxiety-complacency-passion-in

Friday, June 11, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional, practical implications somewhat tested.

Alec Ryrie, in *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt*, traces two kinds of ways unbelief emerged in early modern Europe, two emotional regimes that produced it: anger and anxiety.

To simplify what he says: Angry unbelievers are angry at Christians and take it out on God by denying him. Anxious unbelievers are those who wish they could believe, but are afraid that they can't, and as their anxiety keeps them from trusting God, find that they can't.

I would add two more kinds of emotional regimes that can found unbelief: complacency, and passion. (There may be even more, but these are the two to add for this post.) Complacency might have been missed by Ryrie because he was studying how unbelief could arise in an overwhelmingly theistic society -- how theistic society could break its own theism. But complacency can motivate unbelief when unbelief is taken as an easy, available option. Passion, on the other hand, is neither complacency nor anxiety nor anger. One might disbelieve because it was apparently the right thing to do. A person could have a genuine passion for the truth and come out an atheist.

I'm not sure how to define passion, exactly. (What follows may need to be revised later.) Maybe it's like having a passionate hobby, or a passionate life pursuit. The truth can be something you pursue for its own sake, with more than just your thoughts. You can pursue truth in a fiducial way, in how you trust. You trust that path, but not in a way where you are primarily concerned with your own survival, comfort, or gain. Buber says that good is done with the whole soul. Maybe that is the best way to put it. Passionate truth-seekers pursue truth with their whole souls. Passion is trust, pursuit, and other-orientation.

At the same time, believers can believe out of anger, anxiety, complacency, and/or passion.

This post is concerned with epistemic or intellectual emotional regimes

(epistemic or intellectual anger, anxiety, etc.). Anger, anxiety, complacency, and passion play out in other areas of life as well.

Which of these emotional regimes is most truth-conducive? One can easily see how anger and anxiety might not be. If you've ever been around someone when they are very angry or very anxious, you probably did not find their angry or anxious beliefs to necessarily have a faithful connection to reality. Complacency as well is something which disconnects people from reality. When you stop looking, or take an easy answer, then you're probably not in line with truth.

While passionate people can be wrong about things, their regime is that which is most plausibly aimed at, and capable of reaching, the truth. You aren't as much obligated to believe any thought or intellectual path in you that arises from anger, anxiety, or complacency -- perhaps each of the characteristically angry, anxious, or complacent mental movements are self-defeating. If you believe that there is no God, or that there is, for passionate reasons, then perhaps you are right. But the same belief, held for anxious or angry or complacent reasons, is not to be trusted, until you have left the state of anxiety, anger, or complacency.

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If you want to be passionate in truth-seeking, you may find yourself wandering into anxiety. You want to know what really is? You have found your answer? Are you sure? That last question can trigger or express anxiety. Somehow passion can have high standards for the truth, without being anxious.

Perhaps we could look for cases in which beliefs mostly only seem to be held by anxious people, by contrast with passionate people, and those which are more characteristic of anxious people are not to be trusted as readily. And again, if you see a belief forming or recurring in you when you are anxious, especially one which is connected in some plausible way with your anxiety, then don't put too much weight on it, see if it makes as much sense when you are passionate again.

Can you passionately, as opposed to anxiously, think that you are in some danger of hardening? I think that if you are passionate, you are not hardened yet, and are not the closest to being hardened. Complacency and anger are much more dangerous. A hardness of heart and mind do not correlate with passion.

You may still be in some danger of hardening in the future, but as a passionate person, you would view such risks with awakeness (or something like it) rather than anxiety.

(Anxiety is less dangerous, with respect to hardening, than complacency and anger, but more dangerous than passion. You aren't convinced you're

right, as you would be in complacency or anger, but if you are anxious, you find it difficult to trust God, and to the extent that you choose to be stuck in anxiety, you may be avoiding trust in God -- that disposition of avoiding being a risk factor for hardening.)

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Incidentally, one could ask, which form of love is best, that which is founded in anger, anxiety, complacency, or passion?

If you want to be like Jesus, should you spend more time in anger, anxiety, complacency, or passion?

Labels: #epistemology, #psychology

Bias; Materialism Bias

%bias-materialism-bias

Sunday, June 13, 2021

This post contains both a working definition of bias and an example of a bias.

Bias is when what is not-strictly-rational is programmed into how we think or intuit.

Materialism is the belief that matter is real and its own substance just because it feels real, or the further belief that all that exists is matter. So materialism bias is when this belief goes beyond what is strictly rational. To some extent (to a large extent), we see things the way the others in our culture do, so a bias can be a societal thing, not just an individual thing. Materialism has been the underlying belief of atheists and practical atheists for the last few centuries.

It's possible that when we perceive matter to be real ordinaristically, that should count in favor of matter really being real. But I find it easy to think that the perception of matter being real may really be a perception. This informs how I look at material objects, ordinaristically. I see them as simultaneously material objects and perceptions -- as perceptual objects, perhaps. Whatever lingering sense I have that matter has to be its own thing to the exclusion of an immaterialist view is, in my view, a materialism bias.

I don't know exactly how to tell the difference between "this intuition is valid noetic perception" and "this is a bias". But I think it's possible for there to be biases, and for there to be such a thing as materialism bias. Perhaps simply by asking the question, people can sometimes introspect and see that they have been biased, instead of that they have perceived something noetically.

The arguments for immaterialism (the attractiveness of monism and the inescapability of the reality of consciousness) may provide enough reason to think materialism false, and that lingering intuitions to the contrary are probably bias.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #psychology

Human Nature Bias

%human-nature-bias

Sunday, June 13, 2021

Rationality is founded on what we find believable. Likewise, fideism is founded on what we find believable. What do we find believable? Where does that come from?

One answer is biology. Our brains are the way they are, so that is why we find certain things believable, and other things not believable. I don't think human nature is inherently biological, but it does seem that by altering the brain, we can alter even that non-biological reality (there's a tight correlation between brain and consciousness).

To the extent that the brain can be altered by people, we could alter what is believable. (If there's some aspect of human nature that does not respond to brain manipulation and that does respond to some other manipulation, then that too can be altered.) This would be a form of "overcoming bias", overcoming "human nature bias". But if we could overcome bias to an arbitrary degree, what should be believable? For whatever answer to that last question, how do we know that?

Maybe we could say that we should find believable that which promotes survival. If we didn't survive, we wouldn't exist. So, why should human existence be a criterion for what's believable? We have a strong survival bias. But why not overcome that bias? We also have a strong anti-pain bias. I can see that we probably would always choose to have that one. But *should* we? Do beliefs that follow anti-pain bias actually connect us with reality and thus tell us which beliefs should be believable? It might fit us for reproduction and to fit into our environments (or to bend in favor of whatever is using pain to control us), but why do we think that connects us to reality? Where does our concept of reality (i.e., the definition of the word) even come from?

But somehow we *know* that things matter and thus that there is such a thing as the truth / that which ought to be found believable. This is something we know as persons, even starting out from the Cartesian starting point. It's how we start out from that position.

It's somewhat like how we *know* that there is such a thing as morality, even if we tend to struggle to ground morality rationally. Maybe there is a set of valid believabilities, just like there could be a set of valid moral duties. In both cases, we would have to ground their validity in something that was not rooted in human nature. It would have to be rooted in "should" of some kind. What kind of ought can transcend human nature,

and lay claim to being ultimate? Can we know anything about this ought, which would help us to know what we ought to find believable? Does this ought give us a reason to trust our existing believabilities, and to what extent?

If this ought is conscious, and a person, who values us, who is the seat of trustworthiness, who to a great extent understands simantic words the way we do, then we can know and trust this ought-person to speak reality to us in a basically trustworthy way, and there is a reason for our believabilities to be valid, and even for our alterations of our believabilities to be potentially valid, as long as they are compatible with belief in that ought.

But maybe there is some other explanation. Could ought be something impersonal? How much can we know about an impersonal ought, one which does not reduce to human nature? Can we know enough to validate any of our natural believabilities, and guide us as we gain the ability to change human nature?

Labels: #definition, #epistemology, #metaethics, #psychology, #rationality

Second Thoughts on Time

%second-thoughts-on-time

Sunday, June 13, 2021

Some time after writing some first thoughts on time, I now have some more thoughts.

Before, I thought that time was something that could genuinely be experienced at different rates. So a kindergartener would find recess lasting longer than the (adult) playground attendant would, even though the clock said it was 15 minutes for both of them. The kindergartener moving constantly, and the playground attendant standing there. The kindergartener would literally experience, say, 30 minutes of recess, and the attendant only 7.5 minutes. The quantity of life lived, of existing, would be greater for the kindergartener than for the attendant. They could interact because they would be reconciled to a "master clock". Traditionally, this master clock would be physical time, and subjective time would be in some sense prone to illusion and not the bedrock reality.

In my system, I wanted to say that the master clock was God's experience of time. But then I had a hard time understanding how God could experience a 30 minute kindergartener recess with a 7.5 minute playground attendant recess at the same time, and really experience them in such a way that an event caused by a kindergartener could affect the playground attendant in a sensible way. For instance, at minute 20 of the kindergartener's recess, the attendant would already be done. So would God wait until minute 20 to convey the kindergartener's misdirected ball into the attendant's reality? This didn't sound good to me.

Now, I think that perhaps a better way to look at it is that subjective time is not a direct experience of the passage of time. We only exist in the moment, in which we have beliefs and perceptions about the past. Our ordinaristic experience is that we have a past and that time passes a certain way, but that very experience (that set of beliefs and perceptions about the time which has passed and how quickly it is passing) changes over time, and the new moments arise at a rate which is constant, fits some kind of master clock that all of us adhere to. Like with the anti-realism about matter that is necessary for consciousness monism, there must also be an anti-realism about perception of time. Our ordinaristic experience is that we experience matter, and time that varies in rate of experiencing. Material objects are perceptual objects, and subjective time is something like a perceptual object. We perceive our pasts, which are simantic words. The bedrock reality is still consciousness proceeding at a steady rate, and I would still say there is a "master clock", which is God

speaking experience to all experiencing beings.

Labels: #metaphysics, #psychology, #time

Dimensionality of God's Point of View

%dimensionality-of-gods-point-of-view

Sunday, June 13, 2021

How does God experience other people's exact consciousnesses at the same time as his own, and all other people's?

Humans experience in three dimensions (plus time). So it's hard for us to experience another three-dimensional experience at the same time as our own. However, we do experience two-(spatial)-dimensional experiences other than our own, when we watch movies. I could watch 10 movies at once if I wanted to, by arranging 10 screens in such a way that I could see them all. It's not particularly hard to imagine watching an arbitrary number of 2-dimensional movies -- there are physical limitations to how many screens I could view at one time, but it's not too hard to imagine how a sufficiently "large" being could, simply by scaling up human capacities without making a qualitative change, manage to perceive as many screens as desired.

By analogy, then, if God's consciousness is in at least four spatial dimensions, then it should not be too hard for him to perceive an arbitrary number of 3-dimensional consciousnesses.

Labels: #God, #note

Axiology ("Axizeiology"?)

%axiology-axizeiology

Sunday, June 13, 2021

18 January 2022: fixed a typo.

When thinking about ought, what makes ought ought? When we ask what makes being be what it is, we are talking about "ontology". And I think that ought must have an ontology, or be connected to that somehow. I have tended to think that it must be "made of" consciousness, or be conscious, according to the consciousness monism that makes the most sense to me.

However, what really makes ought ought is its deservingness. That a law is valid is not just that it has ontological status (it's "on the books"), but that in some way it is worthy. The worthiness of the law is according to "axiology", from the Greek for "worthy".

Which comes first, ontology or axiology? Probably they have to go together and in a sense are one and the same thing. A dimension of being is deservingness, and deservingness is. What is deserves to be, according to its axiology.

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The meaning of "axiology" that I first encountered (and I think is more common) is "a ranking of things according to worth" not "that which makes something worthy". So maybe it would be good to have a separate term for "that which makes something worthy", the analog to "ontology". Maybe the word could be "axizeiology", from the modern Greek for "deservingness". Generally I don't think want to coin new words, but I can see how this might be helpful.

Labels: #axizeiology, #definition, #ontology

Is-believing vs. Ought-believing

%is-believing-vs-ought-believing

Sunday, June 13, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional. I haven't fully tested this idea.

I read through some old notes from 2016 and 2017, and I'm struck by how much I lived in the world of "is" back then. There was a lot about how we don't really know anything, we just trust; how there isn't any ought, things just are; and there was quite a lot of me talking about whatever psychological state I was in, under the assumption that truth can be found by looking to the "is" of psychology and diaristic lived experience, rather than the "ought" of philosophy or religion.

I find myself now more on the side of "ought". This blog, while still somewhat "formulaless", still aspires, at least overall, to talk about truth the way truth ought to be, according to topics, building up a knowledge-base.

I am aware that according to "is", there is no such thing as knowledge. There's always a way, imaginable or not, that we could be wrong. There is even a way, imaginable or not, that what is likely to be true is false, despite the unlikeliness of the alternative view. There is infinite possibility and only the bare given, and any concepts we apply to the given, we have no proof of having anything to do with its real nature. We generally ignore all that and believe things as though there is knowledge, and we all more or less approve of each other doing that. So we don't question all the way down.

But is reality something that fundamentally is, or is it something that fundamentally ought to be? It seems like some "ought" creeps into most people's thinking, to avoid the profundities of "is"'s nihilistic agnosticism. That things are as they should be allows us to interpret them, to take them as meaningful, to be able to process them with our minds in an intelligible way. And while I could argue that this is merely a "practical epistemology", that is, we bring in "ought" for practical purposes, I think we are often not aware of that potential motive, and didn't decide to think that way for that purpose. What I have called "descriptive epistemology" concerns itself with things that, with effort, a person could still disbelieve, out of a diehard commitment to "is". But we know them nonetheless. The foundations of knowledge have to include some "ought", and maybe this is just the way knowledge is, and unbridled "is" is not the fundamental

principle of reality.

(After writing this and coming back to it, I see that a reader might still not grasp what I mean when I say "is" and "ought". Maybe it is helpful to think of "is" as "that which just is" and "ought" as "what ought to be". In our materialism bias world, we think that "ought" is "patterns that humans impose on reality, or wish to find in reality". But in a "less-traditional modern society" (not as materialism-biased), we could say "ought itself has its own being and its own deserving (the ought equivalent of is's "being"), which ultimately derives from a non-human source".)

If "ought" is part of reality, then can we "ought-believe"? Or are we stuck in "is-believing"? "Is-believing" is when you are in your natural state, using the flesh of your brain, going with your gut, using the rational faculties that are given by evolution or (fallen?) created biology. "Ought-believing" is when you see that something is justified but the difficulty in considering it to be knowledge ("justified true belief") comes in the "believing" part. If something makes sense but feels unnatural to believe, we find ourselves sketched out, edging away from the belief, simply forgetting the issue and going on with natural believing. But ought-believing is a disciplined believing. Is-believing is the way of being pulled this way and that by moods and spirits, which sprout in our natures, while ought-believing is the way of freedom from all that.

What is "faith"? Faith may be is-believing, where the "is" is provided by God. Or faith may be ought-believing, where we grip onto a piece of wood to save ourselves, rather than hoping in the ocean liner of "is".

Aside from faith, I can think of three examples where I find I can believe according to ought-believing, but less so or not at all according to is-believing: 1. The notion that there is no such thing as knowledge because we can never know anything -- there is always a possibility of us being wrong for reasons we can't imagine. I can't is-believe this. In this case, ought-believing is needed to fully apply "is". 2. Most of Berkeley (at least, his basic immaterialist project), I find is-believable, but his insistence that an idea is inert and its being is to be perceived, and a mind is just that which perceives and acts on ideas, and anything else is inconceivable (or, the way I could put it a little differently, nothing beside consciousness can contact us metaphysically) I find possibly ought-believable, but less so is-believable. (A similar formulation that I definitely find ought-believable, and strangely only equally is-believable, though it is a weaker claim, is "All we know exist are minds and ideas. Everything else is doubtful.") 3. To some extent, I can find the following statement is-believable, but to some extent, only ought-believable: "That which is must ought to be, and ought to be absolutely; absolute ought comes from incontrovertible legitimacy; only a person (or set of persons) who was disposed to experience the full burdens of reality could ought to have founded all of what absolutely is and ought to be; such a person (or set of persons) exists and is legitimacy".

I feel most comfortable affirming this statement, of the three, according to justification and according to a basic sense of trustworthiness. But if I remain in "is"-believing, I can't believe it fully.

Is ought-believing trustworthy? We could ask "Is is-believing trustworthy?" Is ought-believing affirmed by is-believing? Is is-believing affirmed by ought-believing? Ought-believing (or the mindset and truthset that go with ought-believing) would find is-believing incomplete or insufficient. Is-believing would not affirm ought-believing, but should we care what is-believing thinks? I can see that ought could be a substantial realm of reality. So why should I limit myself to "is"? (It is as though to fully explore "the way things ought to be", I must leave the areas where "is" and "ought" overlap, and ought-believing is the way to do this.)

Someone who can see (and isn't colorblind) can know from experience that flowers are colorful, and needn't be worried when a blind person objects that according to touch, there is no such thing as color. Certainly many of us have been disappointed before, and of course we all have the biological slavery to survival, and I can see how that could inhibit belief, but why not believe not according to the "is" of your own pain and fear, and instead according to the "ought" of "seeing whatever is out there just to see it"? Certainly "is" is understandable, but if we are seeking truth, then "ought" is better-justified. Ought-believing goes along with ought-thinking, which is a more disciplined (and thus in some ways saner) way to think.

I think ought-believing can turn into is-believing. I've experienced this. If you try on a thought enough, you start to see the world that way. So if you try on thoughts that you ought to, with ought-believing, you may eventually be able to believe according to is-believing.

I would contrast ought-believing with the "beauty" of *Destruction and Beauty* in that (speaking as the author, privileged to know what I meant when I wrote it), the "beauty" in it is something which, like much beauty, is very "is", is a powerful pull on natural tastes. Otherwise, you could find a degree of analogy between "beauty-believing" and "ought-believing".

Labels: #epistemology, #psychology

Bearing Burdens is Necessary if not Sufficient

%bearing-burdens-is-necessary-if-not

Monday, June 14, 2021

When I talk about legitimacy, I say that absolute ought can't be argued with, and that this requires that the laws of reality are instituted by a being which is disposed to take on the full burden possible, of what the law exacts. I think it may seem that I mean that that is both necessary and sufficient for legitimacy. So this note is just to clarify that there may well be more to legitimacy than just burden-bearing. But burden-bearing is a necessary condition.

Currently, the Father and Son (and I suppose the Spirit) of the Bible fit the bill for "burden-bearers". If there were additional conditions for legitimacy, maybe they would not live up to those. The Bible would still be a useful document in giving us some idea of what legitimacy prefers, although not as strongly as if there were no conflicting additional conditions. Christianity (at least of the major religions) is the most legitimate, and we have some reason to think that the Father, Son, and Spirit may be "hazy" views of the truly legitimate God, and that the Bible is a similarly "hazy", but useful source of the true God's preferences.

But for now, at least, I think the God of Christianity is the only one of the major religions (and possibly of all religions?) that fits the bill of legitimate, and this recommends the Bible to us.

Labels: #axizeiology, #Christianity, #God, #note

Democracy and Burden-bearing

%democracy-and-burden-bearing

Monday, June 14, 2021

Democracy can be seen as "the people who bear the burdens of the laws are given the right to make the laws". Governments derive their legitimacy from "the consent of the governed" -- that is, the people, the citizens, as the source of legitimacy (in the political if not metaphysical realm), lend their legitimacy to the government by consenting to it.

Labels: #axizeiology, #note, #politics

MSLN Creation Account

%msln-creation-account

Monday, June 14, 2021

A quick MSLN creation account:

One reading of the MSLN creation story is that the Father started out barely a person at all, with perhaps bare free will, consciousness, the capacity to barely communicate, to trust and be betrayed, and the ability to "birth" another being. The first being he created was the Son, and they communicated with each other. Patterns of communication produce trust, and more elaborate communications produced deeper trust. These became the simantic words. The Father was bearing the burden of the Son's consciousness through omnisubjectivity, and the Son was bearing what he could of the Father's burden. The Father and Son cared about each other's well-being. By creating the simantic words, they were creating what it meant to be a person, creating their own natures. Each choice they made was right, and established some element of well-being. Eventually, they reached a place of completion, where they knew who they were. Now it was time to create more beings, who wouldn't automatically and inherently be in tune with that initial legitimacy.

A somewhat more orthodox view (from a Christian perspective) is that this process of co-creation was somehow always already done, was something done over eternity past.

I tend to want to be skeptical of actual infinites, which makes me skeptical of eternity past. So I favor the first account.

23 June 2021: It's possible that Father and Son each began at the same time. This is more compatible with the Bible.

Labels: #God, #Jesus, #what is a person?

Book Review and Postview: Warranted Christian Belief by Alvin Plantinga

%book-review-and-postview-warranted

Monday, June 14, 2021

I will start this review of *Warranted Christian Belief*, by Alvin Plantinga, by answering my questions from the preview:

> I got my copy of *Warranted Christian Belief* in the mail yesterday. I have read this book, back when I was college, probably in 2008 or 2009. So I have a vague memory of what it says, beyond its basic premise.
>
> Here are some questions I'm interested in answering:
>
> It could be claimed that Reformed epistemology equally justifies Islamic belief, so how can we tell between Christianity and Islam? This is potentially a very important question, because both of them teach hell. If one of them is right and we don't believe it, we may end up not being saved. Does Plantinga have anything to say that closes off the possibility of other religions being just as justified as Christianity via their own properly basic beliefs?

This isn't exactly how Plantinga put it. He was trying to see if the beliefs of others offer a defeater for properly basic Christian belief. I'm not sure I understand him perfectly, but I think his argument boils down to: "I can ought to believe what I perceive myself even though everyone else contradicts me." This is something that similarly convinced Muslims could say.

Do warranted Christian beliefs have anything to do with the fact of the matter whether God exists? If not, then why would we want them? If they do, then don't they furnish some sort of evidence that the Christian God exists? And then, Muslim perceptions of God also should furnish some sort of evidence.

Plantinga gives the example of a man who is mistakenly accused of a crime (p. 450). All the evidence points to his guilt. But the accused knows

that he was taking a hike far from the crime scene at the time of the crime. Should he believe his own memory rather than the accusations? Well, it seems like he should. But maybe the reason why is because he has a superior reason to know his own whereabouts than those who accuse him. So then, do Christians have a superior reason to know the "whereabouts" of God than Muslims do? There might be a way to make that case, but it wouldn't be solely on the basis of properly basic belief. I think it would have to come from some kind of reason.

Trying to build off of Plantinga, what's going on when a Muslim and a Christian each talk about God? They each perceive Something. They both say that that Something is God. Maybe each of them perceives a different being who only claims to be God. One view (the occult scene's view, or something like one of their views:) --There are spiritual nations, nations of spiritual beings. The Christian nation, which has no superior claim to legitimacy, wars against the nation that includes the occult (and their fellow travelers). Christian prayers and Christian religious experiences are all part of the spiritual economy that fuels the war. Basically, there is a polytheism, and the Christian god is just one of many.-- From this, it's not so strange for the Muslim god and the Christian god to each appear before their followers. Perhaps also not strange for them to each claim to be "the" God. So which one of them, if any, is telling the truth? Plantinga helps to validate that gods can talk to humans, that when it seems like they do, some god is responsible. But I would say that God is not God because he is powerful and can communicate with individuals in a powerful way, but because he is legitimate. Given all of the warring spiritual armies, which one of them is really good? That's the question we should have, when confronted with the influence of spiritual beings. So then we would ask, is the Christian God plausibly the one telling the truth? Is the Christian God really morally better than the Muslim god?

A second possibility is that the Muslim and the Christian are both perceiving the same God. From a Christian perspective, the Muslim is really praying to and worshiping the Father, Son, and Spirit when he turns himself toward the God who speaks through the *sensus divinitatis*. He mistakenly thinks that that God is as described in the Quran, rather than the Bible. (The Quran, perhaps, was a product of a spiritual nation at war with the real God.) But he is actually worshiping the same God as the Christian.

In either case, why should the Christian think he is more likely to be the one worshiping the correct God, or having the correct understanding of God, any more than the Muslim? Maybe some kind of reason can be given, but I think it has to go beyond Plantinga's theory.

> Another objection: If I have what reasonably enough seems to me to be a properly basic belief in God, and then it goes away

> (and maybe then comes back, and then goes away, and so on), what should I think about whether God really does exist? Should I trust the beliefs in God when they come? Does Plantinga address this at all?

I don't think that Plantinga addresses this at all (although I might have missed it). Maybe he could say something like "Well, when you see God, you perceive God. Suppose you see a city off in the distance. As you journey toward it, the fog obscures it. Now you're not sure you saw a city. Then the fog lifts and you see it again. The memory of seeing the city clearly should dominate the fact that the city disappears in the fog. Probably there's such a thing as object permanence, and the city was there the whole time, just covered with fog. Probably there is something like object permanence with God, and you were just in the fog when you didn't believe." If he were to say that, I would find that reasonably satisfying. God seems like the kind of being who would exist all the time. So if I saw God off in the distance, once, I should assume that he still exists. It might be difficult for me to have faith in my memory (in the phases when I don't believe), but not because that faith would be unjustified if I could have it.

> A question: did Abraham have warranted [not exactly "Christian", but maybe we could say "Yahwist"] belief? We have the benefit of billions of fellow Christians to validate our belief. But he was alone at first. If there was someone like him in our day, we would likely think him to be a crazy person who trusted the "voices in his head". How did Abraham know that he was listening to God? Did he not even really know? The Bible presents him as an exemplar of faith. Should we believe like Abraham? I'm wondering if Plantinga addresses this to any extent. (A side question: what is the Bible's epistemology?)

I somewhat expected to see something in *Warranted Christian Belief* about this, based on a memory that Plantinga talked about it. Again, it's possible I missed it, but I don't think it was in this book. I may have gotten it from *Faith and Rationality* (by him and some other people), which I also read back in college.

This cuts to a possible criticism of *WCB*, that once you allow that God can speak his own existence to people directly, he can also command them to do anything. The Holy Spirit could move a person to do anything, and how could anyone object to them? It's like the man who was taking a hike but who seemed to everyone else to be committing a crime. Well, if their evidence overwhelmed his in court, he would have to go to jail or prison. But he would know that he was innocent. Likewise, someone led by God could consider themselves justified in what they did, no matter what the

consequences were, as long as it seemed to them like it was God who was talking to them.

What I thought I remembered Plantinga having said before is that there's some kind of "popularity filter" for beliefs that seem to be from God. Christianity is certainly popular enough that its "great truths" are safely attested to. But still, would Abraham's be popular enough?

One could raise the point that if I think I have something from the Spirit, then what if everyone else thinks they have something contradictory from the Spirit? I can't just be sure that I'm right and they're wrong. But then why not ask if maybe the Muslims are right and the Christians are wrong? We're all trying to figure out what God is saying to us. Maybe a kind of libertarianism is called for. The Muslims and the fanatical Christians can pursue their non-mainstream-Christian beliefs, as though they have been spoken to by the Spirit to that effect, and unless they sufficiently harm or hinder each other or mainstream Christians, they let each other be themselves. This seems like a reasonable social or political solution.

On the other hand, maybe it's possible to filter out Muslim beliefs or certain Christian beliefs. We might be able to say, for instance, that some leadings just couldn't come from God, could not be things that the Spirit would say, based on what we know about God. That filter would probably come from some form of reason, other than the reason given by Plantinga. Maybe we would accept the Bible or Quran as authorities, for some reason, and apply what they suggest using reason. Or we might turn to some kind of natural theology.

> Here is a question / set of questions that, to be fair, may not need to be answered by Plantinga, for being outside his area of expertise, and that I don't really expect the text to directly address. But maybe after I'm done reading the book, I will have a better idea of what I think the answer is, and I can report it when I do the postview for this book. The question is, to what extent does adopting a Reformed epistemology-based approach to belief incline a person to no longer index themselves to reason, and therefore not feel driven to any of reason's other conclusions, the whole skein of perceptions, intellectual relations, and cause-and-effect in which people live?
>
> Is this an approach to truth that inclines us to weep like Jesus (who was weeping when technically he didn't have to, because of his superior divine knowledge), or more toward a kind of inactivity, or even self-satisfaction? For the portion of the church that has learned that faith is superior to reason in

> producing belief in God, is there a danger that that attitude produces ineffective, unproductive Christians? Perhaps also Christians who can no longer relate to the people who don't have that faith that's superior to reason. Do we trust reason less when our assurance of salvation no longer comes through it, and thus fail to follow the law of reason which normally forces us to interact with the world?
>
> Can we become intellectually lazy about the nature of God? If belief is something that we can directly access and which suffices for us, do we assume too easily that we understand God, and do not correct our understanding through natural theology or even Scripture study (which are both based in reason)?
>
> I don't think Plantinga would say that reason doesn't matter at all, since he went to the trouble to write a 500 page book that is based in reason, to try to justify taking faith as properly basic. But I think there's something semi-fideist if not fideist about the idea that "it's rational to just have faith through the belief that you have", more so than something like "it's rational to have faith because of [MSLN or something like it, a chain of reasons, reasons like "there's a high likelihood that all that exists is consciousness"]".

Plantinga did not address any of that, as expected. In theory, a Christian should care about secular reality because it has something to do with the temporal, and even eternal, well-being of people. This would follow from truly warranted Christian belief. An evangelical Christian ("little-e" evangelical) would care as much about secular reality, in principle, as a rationalist Christian. A Reformed, "semi-Reformed", or fideistic Christian would, if they were evangelical. But if they weren't evangelical, they wouldn't. Or they might care, but only coincidentally.

A person (that's all we are, personal beings) is responsible to another spiritual reality, or to none at all. This responsibility is awakening, and produces reality in a person. If we are responsible to God, or to reason, or to the lost, then we care about something, and that includes secular reality. Some people care, and some people don't. Some people respond to responsibility and accept it, while others turn away from responsibility. Some people care but don't want to care, and deep down, they don't. Does it matter what we believe intellectually? I think that Reformed epistemology, by itself, does not incline me to care, not as much as more rationalist takes on belief. So I find it suspicious, dubious, even if its reasoning is valid. Perhaps it causes some people to care who wouldn't

have, otherwise. Is fideism an excuse to take things easy? Is that what trust in God really means? I think a fideist who recognizes this danger can run from the temptation, while still being a fideist. A Christian fideist, if truly a Christian, still recognizes reason, for Christian reasons.

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How can we form or hold beliefs that have some connection to reality outside ourselves? I think this is the real question of epistemology, not "what is justification?" or "what is warrant?". Those questions ought really to be about trying to answer the question "how can we form or hold beliefs that have some connection to reality outside ourselves?"

After reading Plantinga (though not necessarily because of what he said), it seems like "good epistemology is a case of 'you know it when you see it'". You know when you have a good criterion for how to believe when you see it, feel it, understand it. There are certain things that everyone feels to be valid, and some other things that you can hold even when other people don't think they're valid (like if you have a better angle on something). But there are some things that you can't hold if other people don't think they're valid. You just can't. We are all subject to a big "is", which is "what good believing feels like it ought to be". But we take this "is" to be an "ought".

The epistemology I like best (I think) is one of love, or of altruism. So then we should be concerned about the threats to things, and reach out to know things. This leads us into evangelism and altruism, and to reason. I think something like this is probably what God would want us to believe, if he existed.

Also I think about the ought-nature of "ought" (what ought ought to be, and thus is). What we are allowed to know, whatever restriction that says we can't know, is a law imposed on us as personal beings, as is all of reality. So what can make reality valid enough to have a claim on us? I think only one which is made by or is an extension of a legitimacy which is personal and which bears the burdens of its laws to the full extent possible, and this implies God who is Father and Son (in legitimist terms. I think this is something that many people would not accept, but which I think they could if they practiced more simantist-style thinking, which I think is in keeping with what we actually observe, as personal beings.

The world can best be improved if we believe that the ideal is the foundation of reality, even of non-ideal reality. "Ought" enables us to believe as we ought to, not pinned down by "is". (In fact, there could be a characteristically "ought"-style believing, and I think probably we ought to believe that way.) I see "is" thinking in Plantinga, which I suppose is to be expected, since that's the default for knowers. But I want to say that "ought" is the more fundamental reality than "is" -- and somehow we smuggle "ought" in to help us avoid the worst skepticism, even in the

middle of our soberly "is"-oriented epistemology.

I've looked more at epistemology over the last two months or so, and that's my tentative conclusion about it: reality is "ought", so believe what is in accordance with "ought". That is how you will be in tune with reality.

Labels: #Alvin Plantinga, #book review, #Christianity, #epistemology, #Islam

Openmindedness vs. Closedmindedness as Truth-seeking Strategies

%openmindedness-vs-closedmindedness-as

Tuesday, June 22, 2021

If there is a truth that is "out there", which you want to come to believe, and there is some possibility of believing, trusting in, the wrong thing, you might want a strategy for maximizing the chances of believing or coming to believe that truth. Part of that strategy could be policy on an overall mental climate with which to pursue the truth. One feature of that climate could be openmindedness vs. closedmindedness.

If you are maximally closed-minded, you can only believe the truth (if you happen to have found it) and cannot come to know the truth if you have not yet found it. So in the likely event that you may not yet have the truth, or at best you only have a possibly inadequate or incomplete part of it, you want to be open-minded.

But how open-minded? You can be so open-minded that all truths are the same to you, or none are true to the extent that you trust them at any depth. (To trust a truth enough means that it might cause you to effectively exclude other truths by not trusting them, since we only have so much time and energy to devote to truths.) If so, you will fail to really rely on, trust, what is really true.

Maximally open-minded people can't come to believe in, trust, the truth. So if you are truth-oriented, you will want to be somewhat open-minded, but not maximally so, so that you are more likely to believe the truth in the end.

Labels: #epistemology, #note

Technocracy, Competence, Love

%technocracy-competence-love

Wednesday, June 23, 2021

Democracy is when the people, those who bear burdens, make the laws. But technocracies want to say "we derive our effectiveness from being effective, from knowing what we're doing". They take over from the people, and reduce how much the people make laws. But supposedly, they are working for the people, and embody values that the people choose or would choose if they thought about it. Effectiveness is a servant of values, and derives its legitimacy from those values. Values are arbitrary and don't necessarily require expertise to determine.

However, though we might want to subordinate technocracy to democracy, might it be that legitimacy requires that an absolutely legitimate lawmaker (the one who deserves to be ought and thus is ought) know what they are doing when they make laws? This seems plausible, at least initially. And so an unquestionably legitimate being would foreknow all consequences to their lawmaking.

I suppose this is possible, although it would require God (legitimacy) to be timeless or able to be outside of time, which I don't want to say unless I have to. I tend to think that God can't know what doesn't exist yet and which doesn't flow from his will, namely, our future free-willed decisions, and anything downstream of them. He can know generally how things will go for a while into the future by projecting how events are likely to go, and also know what depends on his will or on the negotiations he made with the evil beings, but things can still surprise him. But how could he deserve to have created, then? It would seem that either he foreknew, or would have been prevented from creating any other being.

One thing to note is that we *know*, from observation, what legitimacy allows, which is to say, we see that there are free-willed beings, and that there is great suffering which seemingly could only flow from the possibility of there being free will. So we can say that there must be some feature of legitimacy which allows us to exist. I could bite the bullet and say "God foreknows" in the strong, traditional, time-transcending sense. But another possible explanation is that there is another factor, which is that "God loves".

The three candidates for "value of ultimate legitimacy" then would be "God bears burdens", "God foreknows the consequences of his actions", and "God

loves". Because legitimacy loves, it values the well-being of people. A population ethicist, according to the rest view, sees that the eternal well-being of billions of saved people is worth so much that their existence is more worthy than their non-existence, and so it is more legitimate to create (with the disposition to know as much as possible what you are doing and to bear as many burdens as possible), than to not create, even if perfect foreknowledge (or perfect burden-bearing, for that matter) are impossible.

I think it is plausible that it is not just the burden-bearing of the population (in democracy) that gives them their legitimacy, but that they love themselves, and likewise technocrats derive legitimacy from their love of people, or of whoever else falls under their policies.

I don't like the word "love" because it's heavily loaded, somewhat ambiguous, and tends to be sentimentalized. But I think given those caveats, there's something there: maybe a value for the true well-being of persons, and for persons themselves? But then we need to decide what true well-being is -- or observe how it has been decided for us by God. Does God get to decide what true well-being is? Or is that simply part of his nature? Probably the latter. We are descended from him, so what is good for him is good for us (generally speaking).

There may be something in the common meaning of "love" (among all the loadedness) other than "personal valuing", the simplification proposed in the previous paragraph, which is also part of what ought ought to be. In other words, "love" is the right word, rather than simply "personal valuing".

In the MSLN creation account, the Father and Son co-create what it means to be a person. They do so, disposed to loving and carrying the burdens of those who will be persons after them, looking ahead to the consequences of what they decide. Love is about bringing about the well-being of people as they have been designed by God.

So to summarize and maybe make more clear, legitimacy is love which is a conscious person, and in order to be legitimacy (to be itself) love must be inclined to bear burdens and understand the consequences of its actions as much as is possible given the limitations of love -- of love itself (love must create and the created beings must be free and respected enough to be able to reject God, so as to truly decide to love God), and of love's personhood, its nature as a person. (I have used "it" for "love", but legitimacy is a person, or rather a group of persons.)

Burden-bearing and foreknowledge do not dominate the limitations of personhood, not even ideally, because both burden-bearing and foreknowledge are subcomponents of being a person. They do not exist apart from personhood and the nature and limitations of personhood. And

love by definition is concerned with persons, and so only makes sense within personhood. So legitimacy is most fundamentally a person (or a group of persons), who are described by the terms "loving", "burden-bearing", and "competent / knowing the full effects of what they do)". There is a hierarchy: personhood, then love, and below love burden-bearing and competent foreknowledge. But the hierarchy can be unified: a person (or persons) who is maximally disposed to love, which entails the maximal disposition to bear burdens and be competently foreknowing, among other things.

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A bridge between competent foreknowing and burden-bearing: If we pursue technocratic excellence to an absolute level, we start to need to know everything we possibly can, and if we do, we become omnisubjective. And if possible, we need to know what everything people go through feels like, firsthand, in order to really know what we're doing. So we will need to undergo something like the Son living enough finite lives to experience all relevant simantic words.

Likewise if we bear burdens, we will tend to be motivated to want to do our best in ruling, requiring maximal competent foreknowledge.

Labels: #axizeiology, #politics

The Problem of Trustworthiness

%the-problem-of-trustworthiness

Wednesday, June 23, 2021

If it is true that trusting gives us access to a trustworthy place, but only temporarily (thus proving that that place exists), does this give us any further sense that we are guaranteed the ability to access that place? Would it be trustworthy for a trustworthy place to allow a person to visit there without there being some way to go there permanently? When we enter trustworthiness, we feel like we are safe. Is that sense of safety a lie? We do find ourselves kicked out of trustworthiness, or kicking ourselves out of it. We have to explain this somehow (there is a "problem of trustworthiness": "how can trustworthiness betray us?"), and a likely explanation is that we are not trustworthy ourselves, and we betray trustworthiness by being in it.

Is it trustworthy for trustworthiness to bring us to exist in such a way that we are vulnerable to a bad environment for ourselves becoming trustworthy? Trustworthiness itself can't tempt us to be untrustworthy, and that temptation is necessary for us to become trustworthy. So there must be tempters, and they can negotiate for a world in which people can negatively influence a person's chances to become trustworthy. Since they are needed to tempt right up to the point that a person loses his/her/etc. last sin or idol (the impediments to trustworthiness), they can negotiate for that kind of influence.

How could trustworthiness bring about a world where some could be lost, at all? Or one in which they need to be tempted? Trustworthiness has its ontological basis in consciousness, and is therefore a person or part of a person. Trustworthiness requires legitimacy, and legitimacy requires tempters. People can be lost because legitimacy is founded in love, and love prefers that some exist rather than none, love is willing to experience tragedy for the sake of the ones lost, and for the sake of the ones who survive.

Labels: #note, #trust

Epistemology of Avoiding Scams (vs. Avoiding Bias)

%epistemology-of-avoiding-scams-vs

Thursday, June 24, 2021

One practical epistemology is avoiding being scammed.

A scammer is an intelligent being who wants to take something away from you. People may worry about their biases fooling them, and guard against bias. But biases and scammers are different, in that biases are relatively simple, can't be expected to be devious.

We could say that epistemology (one angle to it) is knowing how to guard against the things that get us to believe falsehoods. An epistemology of avoiding bias will not pick up on the same threats as an epistemology of avoiding being scammed.

A bias epistemologist might be concerned that scam epistemology could be paranoid, vulnerable to "paranoia bias". The scam epistemologist should be concerned about the threat of scam epistemology itself, because a scammer can use all kinds of different ideas as part of a scam, including scam epistemology -- and bias epistemology.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology

Epistemology of Obeying God

%epistemology-of-obeying-god

Thursday, June 24, 2021

One might be afraid of death or emotional pain or of not thinking in a socially-acceptable way, or have other fears related to values like love or altruism, or have some other practical epistemology posted here before, but you might also be afraid of failing to obey God, of not acting when there was some task he wanted (or even needed) you to perform, and that could found your practical epistemology.

Labels: #definition, #epistemology

Love, to be in Tune with Legitimacy

%love-to-be-in-tune-with-legitimacy

Saturday, June 26, 2021

If legitimacy is basically love, then to be in tune with legitimacy requires that we value love, and that we love. If we are legitimate, we can be in kinship and communion with legitimacy. This requires that we value deeply and truly, as legitimacy does. Legitimacy must love most truly (faithfully, genuinely) and deeply (profoundly, valuing what is profound in those whom it loves) in order to be most-legitimate and thus legitimacy. We are required to be disposed to competence and burden-bearing, holding those as values, along with whatever else is required to love.

Labels: #axizeiology, #love, #meaning, #morality, #note

News: 1 July 2021

%news-1-july-2021

Thursday, July 1, 2021

I have been fairly productive over the last year (and going further back), and feel it time to take somewhat of a break -- not that anything is finished, or likely to be. So this seems like a good time to mark a new division in the blog, to a time of lighter writing. I'm not sure how long this time will last. I can promise that somewhere in me is a valuing of many or most of the topics already discussed, and this is likely to remain in me, whether my mind is in the right frame to address them or not.

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However, if anyone happens to have questions or criticisms of posts from the last year, I might go back to them to try respond.

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Labels: #news and meta

Value Drift

%value-drift

Thursday, July 1, 2021

The effective altruists have a concept called "value drift". The idea is that passionate people over time lose their passion and stop being altruists. It is valuable to add a person to an altruistic movement, but also perhaps equally valuable to keep a person from leaving one.

Drift is something that you don't always understand at the time. Some people might decisively quit altruistic pursuits, but the danger is more that you will go lukewarm and then cold over time, sinking into the default without catching yourself.

Labels: #definition, #motivation, #psychology

Pray to Care

%pray-to-care

Friday, July 2, 2021

In life, sometimes we are tempted to not care. Happiness or discouragement alike can rob us of some of our personhood, as on some level we settle into the blindness of nihilism. It's likely that evil spirits would use these things, even happiness, to blunt our ability to help other people and our ability to create a culture in which people are passionate theists and altruists.

When I feel these tempting spirits come over me, I pray. I think seeking to connect with God relationally, overall, helps as well. Jesus recommends believing that you have received something you have prayed for, and it will be yours. I find these prayers, prayers to care or return to caring, to always help. Maybe it helps that I pray under other circumstances, about things that matter to me, to build up my trust in prayer.

If prayers like these were tried by more people, perhaps there would be less value drift.

Labels: #motivation, #note, #prayer

Side Effects of Solving Problems

%side-effects-of-solving-problems

Saturday, July 3, 2021

When you solve a problem, you're often trying something new. You're adopting a new mindset, or developing a new institution or habit, developing a new relationship. In order to live you seem to have to use new tactics, "whatever works". But solutions have side effects. (This sounds like something We Are Not Saved would talk about on a societal level.)

So what you can end up doing is solving a loud, obvious problem by trading away something of quieter but greater importance. You might laugh off your problem, and get relief from "taking it too seriously", but as a consequence lose some of your ability to take anything seriously, and thus close yourself off to the voice of God to some degree. Or you might push for justice, and get what you deserve -- and not learn to receive greater gifts from God.

I am a bit hesitant to be a historian, but I think I see in the cultural history of the 19th or 20th centuries a kind of build-up of tension, up to a time of breakdown from perhaps 1920 through 1970 or 1980. I know of existentialism in postwar Europe and the big cultural crises of the 1960s. There was a time when people would be deeply disturbed by intellectual teachings, especially existentialism. Well, existentialism can be read just as easily now as then, and it hardly has any effect. We are not concerned with the burning question of "Is there a meaning to life? How can we go on given the 'death of God'?" Now the questions just don't have much resonance with us. We're just fine... but maybe the sense of "there is a right and wrong" and the (what I would call) cultural passion that led people to take things really seriously in an idealistic way (what I would associate with "having a sense of real meaning in life") is exactly the thing we need now, and our alleviation of our anxieties and mental anguish over existentialism traded away something that we would regret, if we hadn't blinded ourselves spiritually, and which we have good reason to regret.

The Enemy, of both societies and individual people, profits by throwing stresses at us and leading us to choose solutions which trade away something of real value. The scam of evil is multi-part sometimes, taking attention away from what is really at play. Satan wants to make you miserable, and that's obvious, but also wants to shut you down, make you hopeless, cynical, turn you away from loving and trusting God.

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However, as dark as all that sounds, the good news is that sometimes you can solve a problem and then correct for the solution's side effects. You can deal with the obvious problem and not get taken in by the quiet lie that tends to go with that solution.

Labels: #evil, #life choices, #life lessons, #meaning

Attractive vs. Coercive Law

%attractive-vs-coercive-law

Sunday, July 4, 2021

One way to look at a law is to see it as something which obligates and coerces, as though we might die if we don't obey it, or cause some kind of irrevocable harm right now. There is a forceful urgency to coercive law. The law is an impersonal force. We are slaves to the law, and so is everyone else, and this is how we can live together in harmony, if the law is good.

Another way to look at a law is to see it as almost a living being that draws a person toward compliance with it. The law can be turned away from, from time to time, so that a person is drawn toward some other attractive principle. But as the person turns from one thing to another, they will eventually look at the law again, and because the law is attractive, they will be drawn toward it.

An attractive law can be just as necessary as a coercive law. That is, it can feel just as necessary, and that the law be observed may be just as necessary. But the difference is that in an attractive law, or a law that is approached in an attractive way, it feels like you are drawn toward the necessity, instead of, as with coercive law, or law approached in a coercive way, being forced to observe the necessity *right now*. A coercive law is one as though you're already behind on observing, while an attractive law is one as though it pulls you toward a future of full observance.

A coercive law goes against what you want, and you are forced to observe it, but an attractive law, or the thing which enables you to approach a law in an attractive way, changes you so that the observance of the law is something you genuinely value, love.

The MSLN view of laws is that there really are absolute laws which must be observed "or else", but that there is a long process, or journey, where we are drawn toward observing them. The "or else" is a note of coercion, but we must leave coercion behind if we are truly to avoid the "or else". The "or else" is a gateway into feeling the necessity behind what we observe out of love. But a law that we observe out of coercion is not one that we love, and in order to be in tune with legitimacy, we must value what it values, love its laws as much as it does. So, in MSLN, law is something that we are drawn toward, over time, attractive law.

Labels: #definition, #God, #morality, #motivation, #psychology

Dependency, Independence

%dependency-independence

Monday, July 5, 2021

I wrote the following almost two years ago to the day (6 July 2019):

In *The Wind is Howling*, the author, memoirist, Ayako Miura, is for many years in the hospital with tuberculosis. There she meets a fellow patient named Tadashi Maekawa, who nurses, teaches, pushes her out of nihilism, in the direction of Christianity. Tadashi expects he won't live long, but invests his energies in helping Ayako. They start as friends but eventually fall in love. For her health's sake, Ayako has to travel to a different hospital.

P. 93 (1976 IVP ed.) / ch. 26:

> At this point Tadashi Maekawa looked at me and smiled.
>
> 'Aya-chan,' he said, 'the time has come for you to live without relying on me or anybody else, because as long as you are living in dependence on others you cannot really live. You've got to make up your mind to depend on God.'
>
> But while he said this he also admitted it was wretched to know no one, and he sent a postcard to a Mr Nishimura, an elder of a Sapporo church. I knew nothing about him.
>
> > Miss Ayako Hotta [maiden name of author], a seeker from Asahikawa church, is going into hospital in your city. Please do what you can for her.

So, to really live, rely only on God. Often, you will need other people, but don't rely on them, don't be dependent on them.

Labels: #Ayako Miura, #God, #life lessons, #relationships, #trust

God's Self-Obedience

%gods-self-obedience

Tuesday, July 6, 2021

The vision of God which I have presented in this blog tends to be a God constrained by this or that rational factor. To think of God as being constrained by anything may sound like a lowering of God to some people. I don't think that God's greatness derives from anything other than his legitimacy. In other words, it's not his power, freedom, sovereignty or anything else that is really great. We as humans are impressed by such things, but if we truly understand love, we are no longer impressed by them, seeing them only as servants of love.

So in some cases, I am (or at least could be) in conflict with more traditional approaches to God. However, in the case of constraint, I think I can provide a bridge between my view and what I take to be theirs.

God is obedient to himself. All of his constraints follow from his self-obedience. Because he is who he is, he must obey that. So his nature constrains him. But his nature just is himself, and so God is sovereign after all, yet, still limited in some ways.

Labels: #God, #morality, #note

Really Believing, Really Healing

%really-believing-really-healing

Saturday, July 10, 2021

To believe that something is true is not just to believe that one should believe that it is true, to prove it true. Belief is not just recognition of the justification of a belief, even if somehow justification is to show that something is true. To believe is to trust what you believe you ought to believe. So attempts to justify beliefs can keep things in the frame of justification, rather than ever proceeding from that into the frame of belief, of trust, and thus defeat the purpose that one would think they serve (to guide people to believe what is true).

--

Another angle: If you're seeking healing by repeatedly doing something, that's different from just being healed. The mindset of trying to heal yourself may be preventing you from being healed. Healing is not when you apply effort to yourself to bring about an effect of healing, it is when you are actually healed.

Labels: #epistemology, #mental health, #note, #trust

Exile

%exile

Thursday, July 15, 2021

Holding a value that is unpopular is difficult. You may find yourself surrounded by people who don't value what you value, and you may find it difficult or impossible to live out your values. So, in this case, at least retain the sense that you are in exile. Someday perhaps you will see yourself in a social environment where your values are common enough that you can live them out. Even if there is nothing practical you can do to further your values, you can remain true to them by keeping your innermost self apart from the world around you, keeping a fire burning for the day when it is safe to show it. If the people who see a vision can at least hold onto it in this minimal way, then if they happen to find each other, they may recognize each other and produce that social environment for them in which they can live out their values to at least a somewhat visible extent. But if they don't hold to their values in exile, this can't happen. You can adopt a value in exile that you couldn't adopt publicly, and thus be true to what is really good.

The mindset of exile is a way to resist value drift. Arguably, value drift is really "lifestyle drift". If your life forces you to not live out your values, then you can still hold your values, if you hold them in exile.

Exile requires patience. Patience is when you can wait for the future, and you can exist in the moment without having what you really want.

Labels: #motivation, #note, #social connection, #valuing

Relating to God but not Forever

%relating-to-god-but-not-forever

Thursday, July 15, 2021

There are times when God speaks to you, lives in you, which make it seem like there is nothing but his favor for you, and you are guaranteed to be with him forever. This is like how it feels when you're friends with someone, or in love. But friendships and love relationships break, despite that.

So it is with God. Like with human relationships, the closeness that you share is a good sign for what's to come. But the saving relationship between you and God can come to an end, if you choose decisively enough to value something else over putting him first.

Labels: #God, #note, #relationships

Really Praying by Believing

%really-praying-by-believing

Friday, July 16, 2021

One traditional way to pray tries to get you to adore God, confess your sins, give thanks to God, and ask God to help with needs. (There could be other ways to pray.)

When you pray, really believe. Don't just say words of adoration for God, actually adore him (find him valuable and worthy in your thoughts and feelings). Don't just say words of confession, really see them as sins. Don't just say "thank you for what you've done for so-and-so", really be grateful for what was done. Don't just say words asking God to help with needs. Really believe that you need them, and that God will help with them.

Labels: #God, #note, #prayer, #valuing

God as Younger than Us

%god-as-younger-than-us

Friday, July 16, 2021

A lot of what makes a person older or more mature is their broken-downness and lack of energy. So God, though he is many millennia older than we are, may in a sense have a younger outlook than many of us, because he still has his energy, and he is more functional than we are.

We think that the truth is that which is believable by mature people, but it may really be the case that immature people, in many ways, are closer to the truth, see things with eyes as young as God's.

Young view of reality: looking at reality literally instead of through the lens of practicality. A thing is what it is in itself, not seen in the way that is most advantageous to us to see it for our own personal well-being over the long term. We are not practical beings who use sight, but we are seeing beings, when we are young. Also, each moment or person or idea (etc.) fresh, instead of discounted by their diminished place, among other moments or people taken generally, general rules, "the way things work".

Labels: #epistemology, #God, #maturity, #note, #pragmatism, #truth

Judas as Victim and Perpetrator

%judas-as-victim-and-perpetrator

Saturday, July 17, 2021

Judas as perpetrator: he stole from the moneybags. Judas as victim: Satan entered into him. Even if (as perpetrator) he invited Satan into him, Satan using you takes you further than you would have gone on your own. You are Satan's victim if Satan uses you.

Labels: #morality, #note, #spiritual bondage

Legitimacy from Parenthood

%legitimacy-from-parenthood

Monday, July 19, 2021

In our modern, liberal, democratic society, we don't always think about how for many generations, and to some extent today still, legitimacy came from parenthood. A king is a large-scale chieftain, who is a large-scale patriarch, who is a large-scale father. Nations, a long time ago, derived from families that kept getting larger while retaining their unity. It's possible for a tribe or kingdom to be headed by the patrilineal descendant of its founder, although often that has not been the case. But the nation as family could adopt a man or woman to be its father or mother, to serve in that office. The process of adoption would itself have its own source of legitimacy (perhaps technocratic or democratic to some extent), but the legitimacy of the office would be analogous to the legitimacy of parents over children.

Even in liberal societies, we recognize the rights of authors and artists over their creations. They are parents of beings in the world of thought and imagination. Similarly to how kings and queens can be selected despite not inheriting the throne, authors or artists can assign some of those rights to others besides the author or artist, through a process which has its own legitimacy. An author might assign the intellectual property rights to another, or even the right to write books that are canon. The right to canonicity usually (always?) has to follow from the author, as the author's authorship (parenthood) is where canonicity comes from.

The God of MSLN is the original person, through whom all other persons descend, and so, if parenthood is a necessary criterion for absolute legitimacy, the God of MSLN qualifies on that count. (Likewise, as creator, God has whatever legitimacy we might say applies to an artist.)

Parenthood (or authorship/"creatorhood") is not an absolute criterion for legitimacy. A sufficiently abusive parent is not a legitimate parent.

Labels: #axizeiology, #creativity, #God, #note, #politics

MSLN Universalism?

%msln-universalism

Monday, July 19, 2021

A person looking at MSLN, particularly the natural theological side ("MSL"), might see in it support for universalism. Why couldn't a God who loved and valued us wait as long as it took for us to freely repent? Or just make us repent, draw us irresistibly?

If God could draw us irresistibly, then it would be he who was loving him, not us. We would be untouched. So we have to go through the process of temptation (and anti-temptation, have to willingly give in to God as much as we have to willingly reject what tries to pull us away from him), in order for us to be the ones who were in tune with him.

Perhaps God can wait long enough for each of us to repent. He can wait as long as the duration of the Millennium. If each of us irrevocably choose him (the opposite of hardening) at or before the end of the Millennium, then there will be the same outcome as universalism.

But God can't wait forever, because sin is something unbearable to him, and something that is unbearable can't be borne forever. Likewise sin is what is unacceptable to him, and if he never rejected it, it would be acceptable to him.

Labels: #God, #morality, #note, #what is a person?

Hope from Truth-Seeking

%hope-from-truth-seeking

Monday, July 26, 2021

An interaction I had on Twitter concerning hope reminded me of Joseph Godfrey's book *A Philosophy of Human Hope*. Often when I read books, I can only really remember a few pieces of them once an interval of time passes. The piece I remember best from that book is "Hope is an openness to evidence." Both despair and optimism are not open to new evidence on some level. (I think the idea was something Godfrey got from someone else (my vague and maybe untrustworthy memory of it indicates it may have been Gabriel Marcel)).

I like this definition because it is a truth-oriented one. You don't hope merely because it's instrumental to making you feel better or more functional. It has that side effect. But you can focus on trying to know the truth, which can always change at least to some extent. So you don't have to get locked (as much) into the survival- or well-being-addicted mindset that accompanies (or comes from) trying to save yourself.

Labels: #hope, #note, #truth

Law For Us or For God; Is Baptism (and Discipleship) Necessary For Salvation?

%law-for-us-or-for-god-is-baptism-and

Tuesday, July 27, 2021

If the law is "for us", it is supposed to be for our benefit and it should not constrain us from freedom and flourishing. We tend to judge laws this way. We understand "benefit", "freedom", and "flourishing" from the default perspective of our culture and our biological nature. In the frame of "for us", our well-being takes center stage. Laws both threaten what is most valuable to us (our well-being as we understand it, by constraining us from what we would naturally do for ourselves) and must justify that threat by ultimately leading to more well-being (more freedom and flourishing as we understand them).

If the law is "for God", it is something that we obey because we love God. The law is something that God desires, and because we value God, we want to bring about states of affairs that he values. We obey him for his benefit, so that he is loved. A law that is not engineered primarily "for us" (as we understand human well-being) may constrain us from freedom and flourishing as we understand them by default.

Laws that are "for us" need to be "for God" in order to be really best for us.

An example of the difference between the "for us" and "for God" approach, from a Biblical perspective: baptism. Is baptism something that we are required to undergo? Jesus says "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20a). It seems as though baptism is something that Jesus wants us to undergo. Is it only for disciples? Maybe. But who should be a disciple? He says "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24) and "he who doesn't take his cross and follow after me, isn't worthy of me" (Matthew 10:38). If you love God with all of your heart, why wouldn't you become a disciple of Jesus? And how would you fit into heaven if you don't love God with all of your heart?

I think you could argue from a "for us" perspective that baptism is not necessary. For instance by saying that those who are unworthy of Jesus

can still be saved (although we couldn't rule out that Matthew 10:38 indicates Jesus' preference for us to be worthy of him), or that if Jesus really meant for baptism, or discipleship, to be requirements, he would have said so more clearly. It would be unfair for God to punish us for not being baptized, or for not becoming a disciple. But from a "for God" perspective, baptism is something we will feel the need to do, unless perhaps God reveals sometime in the future that he never did or no longer does desire it or prefer it. If we are oriented "for God" instead of "for us", we seek out ways to love God, beyond the minimum. Yet, in the end, being "for God" is the minimum.

(One objection: what if you intend to get baptized but die on the way to the baptism? Baptism can be done in the Millennium, if something prevents us from undergoing it in this life. Likewise, if you do not become a disciple in this life, you can in the Millennium. Another objection: Perhaps there is a chance that God wants us to perform the Law of Moses, or some version of it. If we should be baptized, shouldn't it be the case that we ought to keep the whole Law? The Law is much more difficult to keep than it is for us to be baptized. Someday when we are mature enough as individuals and as a society, we may keep some version of the Law, "for God". (In this life, Jesus says "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) so that gives us reason not to create a theocratic implementation of the Law (enforcing it by force).)

We pursue law "for us" at first, and one law is "Love God". We pursue law out of fear for our well-being. But if we love God, that love drives out fear. So then we do not care as much about salvation. In order to be saved, we have to let go of making salvation our number 1 concern, important though it is. At that point, we can be "for God".

Just as love transforms your relationship with salvation, it transforms your relationship with law. You love law, as an opportunity to love God, a serious love (but also a joyful one, for some meaning of "joy").

A law that is truly "for God" is one that we pursue out of love. Whereas laws that are "for us" might not be pursued out of love.

Labels: #God, #Jesus, #love, #morality, #motivation, #power

Shaping With Reactions; Waiting and Trying

%shaping-with-reactions-waiting-and

Thursday, July 29, 2021

A big part of culture is formed through people's automatic or semi-automatic reactions to other people. Perhaps you say "I hope I see So-and-so again, someday", and you are met with a shudder, from someone who can't imagine themselves waiting many years for someone. Maybe you are willing to wait because you wait out of generosity (somewhat parallel to obeying a law out of love of God rather than out of the need for salvation), but they wait out of need, and can't afford to hold onto hopes -- yours could stay fresh if you held to them lightly, but theirs turn sick inside their hearts no matter what.

There is a cultural meaning to waiting for someone: if people overall, as a cloud, have bad experiences with the phenomenon, they react with a shudder, and tend to see obsession rather than faith in the waiting person's devotion. They only see a process that will turn out badly, and which is unreasonable to hope in, and by being unreasonable, those who continue in it are not faithful, but obsessed. The story of romance or faithful friendship is turned into a horror story. And the person who waits may see themselves no longer in the light of faith but rather believe that they wait for reasons of horror and slavery.

The above can be very practical, since people who know each other are the foundation of much practical action, but another, maybe more practical example would be how we react to people who say that they are taking on a task. For some people, taking on a task is something that they can't see themselves doing without a great deal of trepidation. It seems like a big deal to even think of going out and doing something (even if it will not be costly in terms of time or money). Just "putting yourself out there" to do something non-default is frightening. It would be terrible if you did it and failed. What would you say to people? You would have to look at yourself as someone who tried to claim you were something, when you were really undeserving of that honor. Better to have done something default.

But not all people are wired to care about that kind of thing, and can just go and try things -- except that it's harder to try when people around them react with how they would feel if they thought of trying, whether expressing fear or praise for how "big" (and thus abnormal) the thing being

attempted is. The reactions help to spread the mindset, the mindset holds people back so they don't try, or perhaps even causes them to fail, the not-trying or failing gives them a personal life story of seeing how attempting a non-default task turns out badly, and then they too will react to others the way they were reacted to.

We react to other people in the moment, not really understanding what we are doing. If we react, we don't understand the other person as a separate person. And when we react, we are more powerful for striking so rapidly. The other person doesn't have a fair chance to be a person, separate from the reaction, but the reaction enters into them. This can be a tactic, automatic or semiautomatic though it may be (a tactic of spirits other than us, perhaps, or of us). Because it is effective, perhaps more effective than gentle and polite reason, it rules over culture -- not the only ruler, but a prominent one.

Our reactions can be our feelings about the situation another person is in, instead of theirs -- a kind of empathy that doesn't really understand. We put ourselves in the other person's shoes, but we put too much of *ourselves* in the other person's shoes.

Having considered all this, we might ask "Do I really endorse the sentiments and views on the world implied by my reactions?" and if not, wonder if there is a way to not react.

Labels: #altruism, #culture, #hope, #psychology

Hero's Journey vs. Absurdism vs. Ancient Judaism

%heros-journey-vs-absurdism-vs-ancient

Saturday, August 7, 2021

> I dug up this old unpublished post (originally written up in November 2020) because it is relevant to what I'm thinking about now. It was already a post in part about the process of writing it, so I thought it would be fitting to continue the process-nature of it by writing these responses to it now (summer of 2021), in blockquotes.

Sometimes I write comments on other people's posts that I realize later I would have been better off writing as my own blog posts. Maybe I'm scarred, formed, enlightened by my experience at the EA Forum, where everyone feels like there are high standards for discourse. Do I dare write something off-topic? Or only partially on-topic? But my mind is more comfortable when it doesn't have to stay in one place. So I'm erring on the side of posting this to my own blog, rather than posting under the post that occasioned this one. You may wish to read the original post at cerebralab first, to understand the context of what I'm saying, here (or archived here). The basic topic is the worldview of old Dungeons and Dragons vs. new Dungeons and Dragons, which can be paralleled to absurdism vs. the monomyth.

--

This is the part I would have posted:

--I think myths can be applied to parts of lives instead of whole lives. The monomyth is a (relatively) good story to tell young people so that they go do something. Life can be a charmed adventure for a while. And you really can learn lessons. Many or most people experience some disappointment or burnout at the end of young adulthood. That's where the approximation stops working. (But the U-shaped curve of happiness shows that after a few decades, most people start being happy again, although their lives don't necessarily fit the monomyth life approximation anymore.)--

[And then I continue, with text I wouldn't have posted on cerebralab:]

I haven't played DnD much, but I see parallels between new DnD and JRPGs [which I am somewhat familiar with], and between old DnD and roguelikes, which I am [more] familiar with. New DnD vs. old, JRPG vs. roguelike, monomyth vs. absurdism -- are those the only options? Absurdism isn't all good, can tend toward nihilism or living in a convenient way. Personally I prefer things that are somewhat in between in sensibility, like Simone Weil or the Jewish view from within Captivity [the era when most of the Old Testament was written down]. Both of their views retain a strong sense of meaning and right and wrong even in a world that seems to invite being called "Godforsaken". Would those or some other solution provide young people with both "reality isn't all about you and things can go wrong beyond your control" (roguelike, absurdism) and "there is a real task for you to do, a real call for bravery" (JRPG, monomyth)?

I made a modification of the roguelike Angband in which there is something like the ancient Jewish / Weilian worldview -- at least, it's hinted in the game. Going into the dungeon is a moral and tragic thing -- it's so easy to kill monsters, but the monsters have value to you, but it seems like you have to kill many of them in order to make it down to kill Morgoth, the source of all evil, 100 levels down in the pits of Angband.

> Angband can lend itself to an absurdist / mechanistic interpretation, but this modification of it is thematically moral (thus meaningful).

Killing monsters causes game-mechanical sorrow. You are beside yourself with grief when you kill a fruit bat or a blue yeek, as you should be. If this accumulates, you can be overwhelmed with stress and suffering, and you cry out to Tolkien's in-universe God, Eru Ilúvatar, to save you from your life. And he replies, in a game-mechanical way, and you return to the surface, broken, never to adventure again.

It's like the myth of Samson, as remembered by the Jews in Captivity, which is an interesting one to contrast to the monomyth. [The myth of Samson is another case of a split between "there is right and wrong" (meaning) and "things can go badly for you for 'game-mechanical' reasons" (no meaning).] Samson's hubris, aggressiveness, and naivety gets him in a situation where the enemies of Israel can break him. Having broken him, their own naivety and arrogance (or carelessness) leaves him in a position to kill many of them, at the risk of his own life. So he takes the opportunity and kills them, and himself. And he does more damage with that final act than he did to the enemies of Israel in the rest of his life.

> Recommended: read Samson's story, in Judges 13 - 16.

I can see the myth of Icarus in Samson. Icarus flew too high, aspired to

greatness and lost his wings to the sun. Then he fell into the sea and drowned. (But for modern people living the myth, many of us land on the ground, broken for the rest of our lives.)

I'm not adequately informed on ancient Greek myth to say all of what it meant for them, but for us, the myth of Icarus can be simplified to "you think you can be big, until you are broken and made small for good". Maybe that Icarus is more what cerebralab's writer would have preferred over the monomyth, if there has to be a myth. The outcome of "life is meaningless" and "you will lose your wings" is similarly "think safe, small, and convenient". If we could just keep that in mind, we would remain grounded in reality, for some meaning of "reality".

But in between Icarus and monomyth is Samson. Samson is part of an ongoing story, the Abrahamic promise being worked out in the people of God. He ends his life because his flaws have caught up to him -- and yet have placed him in a position for his greatest work. He dies for the people -- who will go on after him. The Old Testament view, in large part, was that there was no afterlife. So Samson does not think he will get that kind of resolution. But there is a God (who empowers him to kill), and there is an ongoing story.

> I reasoned that Samson's story comes before Ecclesiastes (in terms of when it's supposed to take place). (Ecclesiastes is written by a "king in Jerusalem", a "son of David" (likely enough Solomon, I would guess), and Samson's story, found in Judges, occurs before there were kings in Jerusalem.) Ecclesiastes has the view that there is no afterlife. I know that Isaiah has a concept of the afterlife (for instance in ch. 26), and Isaiah was written after Ecclesiastes.
>
> The Abrahamic promise was God's promise to Abraham that through Abraham's descendants, God would bless all families. The people of Israel are the chosen descendants of Abraham to carry on the promise. In order to establish and defend themselves, they had to fight their neighbors -- even if those neighbors were people they were supposed to bless. Why would God set up a situation like that? I tend to view God as having to make difficult decisions, a view informed by the theodicy that makes sense to me.

At one scale, Samson's life is "realistic" in the sense that I think cerebralab's writer means it. His flaws exist, are facts on their own two feet, as it were, and as facts will relate to him whether he wants them to or not. At that scale, life can seem purely mechanical (like the way Angband can feel mechanical, nothing but game mechanics -- no story, unlike a JRPG). But

the overarching story gives his individual sacrifice meaning. Both his glorious but broken death and the humiliation and disability that preceded it are made up for by his part in the overall story of God bringing truth to the whole world, and thus, "blessing to all families". That overall story [the one of the Old Testament / Abrahamic promise] is one which the writer of cerebralab may not recognize. So from their [cerebralab's writer's] perspective, the myth of Samson may still be unrealistic. But if it is, it is not unrealistic in the same way as the monomyth. Samson is not some new-DnD God-PC around whom all of reality revolves. That's not how the Old Testament works. Not even God gets what he wants in the Old Testament (see 1 Samuel 15 for one example of this).

> God doesn't get what he wants in many specific cases, but overall the process of reality will eventually end up spreading the truth to "all families", because God will persist until it happens. So God makes there be a story, on one level, even if he doesn't control reality enough to prevent it from being a "game" (an interlocking set of mechanics). Perhaps all stories must be made by a person, and some of them can only be made by God.

The story of Samson is good -- but it isn't popular. The monomyth, or something like it, is far more popular. Perhaps it is kinder on the mind, an escape. Or maybe, for most people, life is small and relatively safe, and the monomyth is not needed for them as a pathway to heroism. It suffices to think of heroes as heroes, and of themselves as small. The heroism that is in them is spoken to by the story, but they can remain in their small lives, escaping and then returning. I am aware of the view that God experiences great suffering (expressed by me in *How Can We Love?* and in this booklet). If I am being rational, it's hard to escape the thought that he does suffer immensely. After all, he is genuinely loving, and our lives are so painful to behold. And I think he experiences what we experience as we experience it, including our unbearable pain.

And yet it "feels" false. I have thought that perhaps my mind can't handle the truth. Since God experiences what I do, it is better for God if my consciousness is unclouded by empathy I can't handle. (Or perhaps I don't have enough natural empathy to get very far in this area.) So maybe the monomyth is an effective therapy, which does inspire some people. And though there is a better myth of real heroism, that of Samson (if you're unlucky), or perhaps of Moses, if you are luckier, it is not for many people, it seems.

> Now (July 2021), I find it natural to think of God as suffering. It does not "feel" false. I think perhaps the idea went from being something I ought-believed to something I is-believe. I

> have the feelings that I would expect to follow that belief, given that I do not generally have strong feelings (as opposed to intentions) of empathy.

(Moses's myth, for modern people, is that in the later part of your U-shaped curve of life, you are called on to return to the project you had to abandon years ago, after years of toil where it seemed like it was all over.)

We could say that absurdism gives no heroism, monomyth gives the feeling of heroism, and ancient Judaism gives a real form of heroism.

I've heard (or read) someone, perhaps an effective altruist, saying that doing things that are different culturally, culturally frowned-on, even, is a way to have greater leverage. Having a different culture can give you leverage. Maybe the ancient Jewish people, by way of their cultural inheritors (Christians, Muslims, modern Jews, and many secular people), by preserving their difference, ended up having leverage over the world. And then true Judaism-in-spirit, the unattractive path to real heroism, remains as a point of leverage.

> Christianity preserves this through the idea of the cross as something all disciples of Jesus in some sense pursue and tend to go through.

I think youth is a point of leverage. If youth could go better, if young people had better teaching, then they would be able to be different adults, and the world would change. And the Jewish story, if it is well-taught and well-supported, is something that is unpopular enough now that there could be low-hanging fruit to be picked if we adopt it as a culture or in our subcultures. We could teach people with potential that making things better is hard and sorrowful, liable to break a person, but it still must be done, because there is a God who desires it and in whom we trust, and there is a people who will come after us, a people of whom we are members, a field for us. Otherwise, we leave young people at the mercy of monomyth-becoming-Icarus, with no God and no people of God on either an explicit or implicit level.

> To be clear / fair, dying for an ongoing people group could be secularized.

Labels: #games, #God, #meaning, #morality, #stories

Theism Bias and Atheism Bias

%theism-bias-and-atheism-bias

Wednesday, August 11, 2021

It's possible to have a cognitive bias in favor of theism, as well as one in favor of atheism, or opposed to theism.

One experience that I had that makes me think that atheism bias may be a thing is what happens sometimes when I think about credences for the existence of God. I have found, often enough, that I can't believe in God unless I arrive at some internal credence of 1 that he exists. I think when we believe things to be true, it is often to us as though there is no possibility of them being false. To be made aware of uncertainty somehow completely destroys a belief.

A credence of 0.9 isn't good enough for me. I can't seem to process the probability of God existing, which ought to go a long way even if certainty isn't possible. Humans might not ought to be expected to be good at thinking involving probability, but I think there's even an inconsistency in me there, where the 90% threat of something means something to me, but threats that are 90% likely given the 90% likelihood that God exists do not bother me as much as they should, while I do respond (with fairly assiduous avoidance) to most 90% chances of threats that I think matter. I do think that unwittingly being deceived by Satan matters (a likely risk given the 90% chance the worldview obtains which includes the God I believe in). But I seem to often not naturally care about it for some reason, and I suspect that there is some kind of atheism bias at play. Rationally, I should care (at least by my lights), but sometimes find that I don't.

(Another explanation, which may avoid bringing in the concept of atheism bias: this may be a case where my belief in Satan has been more often in the past an ought-belief rather than an is-belief. On the other hand, maybe atheism bias often just is the difficulty of is-believing things related to God.)

That's an atheism bias that cuts through my usual theism bias. Atheism biases can find a more welcome home in other people (maybe the welcome home for them can itself be a bias).

Theism bias and atheism bias both (at least partially) discredit theistic and atheistic beliefs formed under their influences. It's possible that atheistic beliefs that break through a theism bias, or theistic beliefs that break

through an atheism bias, are to be given more credit, for having arisen under hostile circumstances. However, I think that if you want to believe something badly enough, it generates its own bias both toward and away from belief. In other words, the fact that theism bias discredits beliefs formed under its influence creates an automatic atheism bias, which then discredits atheistic beliefs as well. (This puts a person in a kind of impossible position, at least while it lasts.) If atheists want to be atheists badly enough, the same dynamic should hold for them.

Labels: #atheism, #epistemology, #psychology, #religion, #trust

'Ought' Implies 'Can' But How Capable Are We?

%ought-implies-can-but-how-capable-are-we

Thursday, August 19, 2021

I've heard the saying "'ought' implies 'can'". I take that to mean "If you say that I ought to do something, I have to be able to do it." This saying makes a lot of sense, but it can be a deceptive truth, because if we are unaware of the saying, if we instead think "'ought' is when reality demands something of me", then we may well find that we "can" do much more than we otherwise would have thought we could. If we focus a lot on how "'ought' implies 'can'", if we just don't want to do what reality demands of us, we fail to develop the capabilities and thus say "Well, I can't, so I'm not obligated to do anything."

Is ought something we ask of people, and so it would be unfair to ask too much of them? Or is the failure to do what we ought something we impose on reality, and it is unfair to reality to not do what is really called for? The answer to both questions is yes. I guess the way to practically sort this out (one way, at least) is to approach life as though you always have a duty to external reality, and you find out the limits of your "can" by pushing yourself further in your pursuit of fulfilling that duty. You learn that you "can't" by trying as hard as you can and being unable -- and to really know that limit, you have to keep trying even after you think you're unable, until you are unable to try.

If you don't want to do what reality calls for, you will find that you "can't" much sooner than if you do. If you do, you will be more correct whenever you reach the point of judging yourself as "can't".

Labels: #mental health, #mental strength, #morality, #power

Listening to Satan Can Have Good Results

%listening-to-satan-can-turn-out-to-be

Friday, August 20, 2021

28 July 2023: minor edit and added update to the end.

I used to have a friend, whom I will call "A" (she was a philosophy major). At some point, she fell in love with a friend of hers, whom I will call "B", who had been pursuing her romantically. They became a happy couple.

I learned at some point from her that there was a young man who went to the same church as her and B, whom I will name "X". X was not a good person according to A. I don't remember all the details, but he could well have been immature, or had a bad personality, or was in some deep sense ill-intentioned, or something else. In any case, A did not trust him. And it became apparent that he had a crush on her.

At some point, X said that God had told him that he was going to marry A. (A and B eventually got married -- I don't remember if they would have been engaged at this point or not.) The pastor of A, B, and X heard about this and had a talk with them. He told X that God does not tell people that they are going to marry people if the person being sought or desired is in a relationship already (boyfriend and girlfriend? engaged? I can't remember / would depend on whether A and B were engaged at that point or not).

This story has stuck with me for years -- it came from a past era of my life, and it's been quite a while since I was friends with A, as well -- and I still think about what might have been going on.

Did X hear a voice from God? Or from some other spiritual source? Was the pastor's judgment Biblically-based? Or was he saying something pragmatic? Or was he led by the Spirit to say what he said? Or by a spiritual force of pragmatism?

I don't know, and I suspect that the people in the situation also didn't really know.

So what should X have done? Let's assume that he was sincere and wanted to please God. If God tells you you're going to marry someone who is in a relationship, but it could be Satan telling you that, you could say "I just shouldn't listen to that voice, try to forget I heard it". But what if God is trying to tell you something important? It's risky to not listen to God when he's trying to get you to do something, as much as it is to listen to Satan

when he's trying to get you do something. So X might not ought to have just forgotten he heard the voice.

So now what? As a sincere, theistic young man, X might say "well, how can I be most pleasing to God in pursuing this message that I think might be from him, given the possibility that it is from Satan?" He might think of all the ways that Satan could use this message. Perhaps Satan would want X to harrass A and discourage her. Maybe Satan would be setting up a two-step scam, where because of him harrassing her, she had to (or would be tempted to) put up defenses, act out of fear, judge X, etc. Or maybe if he looked further ahead he could see the potential of Satan using his action to affect other people in the church community or the community as a whole. A two-step scam could be meant to get the pastor to form pragmatic judgments ("let's just not have creeps hitting on young women in my congregation") rather than really being open to the range of things God could be asking, weird though they may be -- to put practicality before obedience to God. And this emphasis on the pastor being the "professional manager of human situations" could affect his overall approach to leadership, making him less deeply theistic and thus less able to anti-tempt.

A smart, safe thing X could have done would have been to not mention that he expected to marry A, to stop showing outward romantic interest in her, and simply try to love her and love God, not with any sense of grasping but with the hope that is a "non-technique" (as Godfrey puts it in *A Philosophy of Human Hope*), hoping that someday she would understand that B wasn't the one for her after all, if that was in fact the case. Or even to persevere in loving her without grasping onto that potential outcome (of her realizing that he was more suitable for her). He could try to change to become more suitable for her.

If X learned the ever-educational way of the desert, and perseverance, hope, and trust in God, and sought to become a generally trustworthy person (and thus more trustworthy to God), through the message of "you will marry A", and didn't harrass or otherwise bother A, then no matter where the message came from, the outcome would be fairly unambiguously good from God's perspective (assuming that there are no other significant factors than the ones listed). It might not have been the best possible outcome (maybe X could, or couldn't, have known that God didn't really give that message, and either way it would have been better for him to not listen to it), but unless deciding to forget the message would have furthered some bigger plan of God's (that is, if we just evaluate this situation in itself), it would no longer be a win for Satan, but rather more so a win for God.

So, if that message came from Satan masquerading as God, if X had been serious about pursuing God, and had known how, he would have actually turned Satan's weird advice into something good.

--

28 July 2023:

Having reflected more on evil, my perspective has changed. I think the tone of the above does not take spiritual danger sufficiently seriously. I understand the pastor's behavior more now.

Otherwise, I think the post still makes sense to me. If you're going to listen to voices that could possibly be from Satan (voices in your head, from culture at large, from people you know, etc.) then you should implement what they say in as God-honoring a way you can.

Labels: #epistemology, #God, #life choices, #life lessons, #maturity, #pragmatism, #spiritual warfare

Giving Life vs. Untying Knots

%giving-life-vs-untying-knots

Sunday, August 29, 2021

My straw man conception of therapy is that it is all about untying knots. The therapist (or friend) can talk you through your problems and help you untie your own knots, so that your rope is free of knots. Then you will be at peace and accept things, and function smoothly.

But where do you get life from? What if someone gave you life, and you could tolerate having knots? Maybe life is better than unknottedness. But the therapist (or friend) may not be able to give you life, particularly if their orientation is toward problem-solving, or their goal is unknottedness and not life.

Jesus claims to give us life. How do we connect with Jesus? Perhaps by obeying his commands. We can "ask, seek, and knock", seeing God as someone who wants to give us good things, and that can give life. In times of desperation we learn to pray, desperate enough to listen to Jesus and believe that we have already received what we asked for. We can pursue and undergo the cross, and having been willing to cease to exist (and perhaps undergoing something like death), we come out alive. Perhaps in some other way, Jesus offers life.

Labels: #aliveness, #death, #Jesus, #mental health, #mental strength, #prayer, #trust

Gradients of Respect

%gradients-of-respect

Saturday, September 4, 2021

David Pearce is a proponent of the idea that there should be no more (involuntary) suffering. He wants a future of "gradients of bliss", where people move from states of lower bliss to higher bliss and from higher bliss to lower bliss, but never crossing over into non-bliss.

I was thinking about surly people. Should you respect a surly person? Well, I feel like in our culture, we tend not to. And if someone is demanding respect in a surly way, that strategy for getting respect is one that may coerce displays of respect from us, but not cause us to genuinely find the surly person worthy of respect out of our own seeing of things. If you have to force people to act like they respect you, maybe you look like the kind of person who knows they are not worthy of respect, so they have to force fake displays of it.

However, I think there is a level of respect that all being deserves, that all people deserve. Respect is a seeing of legitimacy and value in something in what it is. Everything that exists ought to exist, on some level. This is especially so with people, who descend from God. Evil and danger deserve a kind of respect. They don't ought to exist forever -- their legitimacy is temporary. But here they are, existing, with a right to be what they are, as illegitimate as that may be on most levels. So, to be properly relating to reality, we need to respect all things, including surly people. But not all things are as legitimate or valuable as others, and there are kinds of respect that are not due some things (for instance demons or the venom of rattlesnakes). So we reserve greater, or better, respect for some things. We should respect all people, but we can or should respect some people in ways that we do not respect others.

This sounds like we always respect, but sometimes respect on higher levels / to a greater extent. In parallel with Pearce, this sounds like something that could be called "gradients of respect".

Labels: #God, #respect, #seriousness, #social connection, #what is a person?

Open Stance, Open Situation

%open-stance-open-situation

Tuesday, September 14, 2021

Suppose you were given the command from God to "keep your options open". How should you implement it? In general, the message is meant for the recipient, so your natural understanding of that is a good starting place. But if you want an additional thought to consider, you can look at both the idea of the open situation and that of the open stance.

In the open situation, you ensure that you are capable of acting on multiple options, for instance, option A, option B, and option C. In the open stance, on the other hand, you are in a mental state where you could recognize a fourth, previously-unseen option (option D) if it were to present itself. Some commitments (for instance to option X) do not take you out of the open stance, while others do.

Trying to secure options for yourself (seeking an open situation) can take you out of the open stance. Being in the open stance can keep you from seeking to secure options for yourself. Maybe there's a way to have both the open stance and the most open situation at once, or maybe you have to balance one form of openness against the other. You might spend time in one place and then the other.

Do you really have options if you are not yourself? If you are not yourself, you *have to* do something. You may have an impressive choice of things to choose from (A, B, C, and even D), but you are trapped in the position of having those four options and having to choose between them. Whichever one you end up choosing, you *have to* -- you don't choose it, you are forced into choosing it, because you are absent from your own life. You are coerced by life to choose, and to choose what you choose, so it wasn't really you who chose. *You* didn't have any options, despite how diligently you acquired the ability to act on A, B, C, or even D.

Being yourself, and being in the open stance, go together, or are the same thing.

Labels: #life choices, #listening, #mental health, #what is a person?

Establishedness and Loving God

%establishedness-and-loving-god

Friday, September 17, 2021

7 September 2023: added a note to the section Establishedness and the Cross.

22 May 2023: changed link from Twitter conversation to archives of Twitter conversation in preparation for me deleting my Twitter account.

Epistemic status: contains innovations on past ideas of mine which I may not have thoroughly thought through before posting this, so there's an element of provisionalness to this. (And new, even more provisional ideas.) Also, tries to say something about parts of the Bible, when ideally I should have read the whole Bible with an eye to the themes in here.

I suspect that there are details which are poorly explained or contradictory somewhere in this. If you are confused about something, let me know in the comments so I can address the problem.

This is the long version of this post. It's about as long as a book. The short version is here.

I am not entirely proud of this (as a writer), but perhaps that is fitting, as you will see. Realistically, I think it's the best version of this that I can produce at this time.

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Part 1: Initial Thoughts

Introduction

I had a Twitter conversation with Susannah Black (@suzania). It got to the point where I felt like I wanted to reply with a blog post instead of trying to work with Twitter's format, so I wrote this.

(Apologies to my interlocutor (Susannah Black) for how long this took me to write. This first part I finished in a day or two and should be seen as more or less what I would have said in conversation on the day of our Twitter exchange, while the following parts reflect later thinking. I considered rewriting this first part to make it more presentable, but decided not to, other than what was necessary for clarity. Also, this post grew to be long -- at least it will not be as long to read as it was to write.)

Here is the context: Black quote re-tweeted someone's take about libertarians (governor of Florida is apparently being a libertarian by being more or less laissez-faire about COVID). That take referenced a *Washington Post* article which was paywalled for me, so I didn't read it. I replied to Black mainly based on the object-level of her tweet, but I can see that she may have read into me some sort of support for the governor of Florida (or similar people or ideas), given that I was in some sense pushing back against something that she said in response to people like the governor of Florida. I don't support the governor of Florida, nor have much of a sense of opposing him. (I have been vaccinated, and I don't mind being masked or even being under lockdown (mostly) so those preferences and actions may show that I trust the values that oppose the governor. But I don't feel like I oppose him, or even whatever it is that he represents, of which he is only the visible instantiation of the day.)

Here are the tweets [or archived from Twitter: 1 2 3 4 5 (6 is the tweet from someone else in case you want to account for all tweets replying to the original tweet)]:

And here are two branches of the thread:

{{Alt text:}}

{{Start of twitter thread:
Susannah Black @suzania, quote tweeted Brad Littlejohn @WBLittlejohn. He said
Libertarianism is an amusing but understandable foible when it manifests in college students. It has rather graver consequences when used as a governing philosophy by the chief magistrate of 21 million. washingtonpost.com/health/2021/08...
Her text, responding, was
Have had a conversation with a libertarian who earnestly believed that Judges 21:25 was, and was intended to be, a description of a good situation}}

{{Then, my response: James Banks @banks10v24
Not having a king was good from God's perspective, though the part where everyone did what was right in their own eyes wasn't good. Actually if the people had had better "eyes", that would have been good, too. Maybe libertarianism is the best and we are not worthy of it.}}

{{Susannah's reply:
Susannah Black @suzania
Well, I'm think {sic} that just as God "made lemonade out of lemons" such that the Fall can be called a felix culpa, because it led to Christ's incarnation and crucifixion and resurrection, so he turned their disobedience to good in establishing the Davidic line.

I reply
James Banks @banks10v24
Maybe without the (contingent?) fact of the adoption of kings, Jesus would never have been cast in the light of king? Imagining Jesus as the Judge (instead of King), who comes down to save us only when things get really bad (sounds somewhat true to life).
Susannah replies:
Susannah Black @suzania
Strong, strong disagree. At the very least, Jesus is The King, and kingship is a fundamental good. There is nothing second best about kingship itself. Even in 1 Sam 8:7, the problem with Israel wanting a king is that it implies that they are rejecting God's kingship.}}

{{My reply:
James Banks @banks10v24
Fair enough -- I forgot 1 Sam 8:7. God is king -- but what does "kingship" mean? When God was king, he was hands off and didn't establish a firm, consistent government.}}

{{Susannah's reply:
Susannah Black @suzania
A "hands off approach" is not, I'll say, how I would describe the government of the Lord of Hosts.

Q: does "kingship" seem like a bad thing to you? Does "firm, consistent government" have the flavor of "bossy tyranny" when you hear it?}}

{{Branches}}

{{A branch, Susannah elaborating. First tweet establishes context:
Susannah Black @suzania
Strong, strong disagree. At the very least, Jesus is The King, and kingship is a fundamental good. There is nothing second best about kingship itself. Even in 1 Sam 8:7, the problem with Israel wanting a king is that it implies that they are rejecting God's kingship.
Susannah Black @suzania
God was/Jesus was a king before the Fall; Adam was meant to be a viceregent under him- a royal office

> Susannah Black @suzania
> I think Americans tend to have a general sense that the ideal situation is that no one has authority over anyone else, and that authority is a kind of emergency backup plan. But I don't think that's the case at all.}}
>
> {{Another branch, my elaboration, first tweet for context:
> James Banks @banks10v24
> Fair enough -- I forgot 1 Sam 8:7. God is king -- but what does "kingship" mean? When God was king, he was hands off and didn't establish a firm, consistent government.
> James Banks @banks10v24
> His people had to trust him more under that regime -- a better outcome from his perspective than if they had a nice, normal kingdom. To this day, if God is king, he's hands-off compared to what we often want.}}

(I could have made those images look better, but it may not be important, as the reader may see below.)

I will try to reply to Black's question

> Q: does "kingship" seem like a bad thing to you? Does "firm, consistent government" have the flavor of "bossy tyranny" when you hear it?

Also I will consider what value there might in less "firm, consistent" government and in libertarian or liberal values. Then I will consider what the nature of kingship could be or ought to be: king as direct leader vs. king as legislator and facilitator? Hopefully this all will address most of the issues raised in the tweets.

Why Firm, Consistent Governments Can Be Good

They can have good consequences

I don't think that "firm, consistent government" has the flavor of "bossy tyranny" to me. I don't mind authority, personally. In many ways, the relatively firm, consistent government of the United States makes many things possible for me. In a sufficiently chaotic world, I might not be alive today, to be able to write things. I've been reading [had read and intend to re-read] *A History of Violence* by Óscar Martínez to learn about the Northern Triangle (which comprises the countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras). Gangs like MS-13 are very powerful there. There are something like 10,000 MS-13 members in the US, which, if you read the book, you realize is more than enough to do a lot of damage, but the

ones who live here generally don't make the national news, probably because our government is "firm and consistent" (has the resources to enforce its laws fairly well). A failed state allows horrors.

I don't think libertarians want Northern Triangle-like situations, and they don't think libertarianism would inevitably lead to them. Libertarians can be minarchists (or something like that) who prefer a strong state when it comes to enforcing protections of liberty. But they are perhaps not the most libertarian of libertarians -- anarcho-capitalists are, perhaps. [These are the libertarians who might be assumed to be most against "firm, consistent" government.]

You could push back against an anarcho-capitalist and say "why wouldn't anarcho-capitalism turn into the Northern Triangle?" MS-13, Barrio 18, Los Zetas, and other gangs seem to be independent firms doing what they want -- some even take over some government services. The difference between a gang and a government is somewhat fuzzy. Do you need one big, authoritative gang that is able to squash the other gangs, so that there isn't so much gang warfare? That may be what liberals have in mind. (Set up the messed-up thing that limits the even more messed-up things.) And libertarians, with that dark view of the reality of government as it actually gets established, want less of it. They seem to think that darkness comes from government itself, since governments can be dark.

Governments may look like gangs, but they don't have to

Black is affiliated with the "post-liberals" / "Christian humanists". From a bit of a distance, it looks to me like their approach is to say "there is a good version of things and we can have it on earth". So there is a really good government. And we can have a really good government on earth (maybe). (A really good army? A really good police force? We're not talking about a really ideal world, if there still needs to be an army or a police force.) Certainly if you remember that there can be a really humane world, and you believe that it is realizable, you may be able to have it, which is less true or not true at all if you are certain that there can't be.

Maybe if we did not have the dark, cynical, desperate, fragile, poverty-stricken worldview of the liberals, if we just said "no, things can be good, we can be good people", then, if we truly understood that and implemented the changes in behavior and institutions that are downstream of that, we could have good governments.

So it may be that it is as though the Christian humanists (Black?) could be saying "government is good -- or it can be good -- that is, kings are good -- good kings are good, at least -- that is, Jesus, the king, is good". So that would be the rejoinder to a libertarian, who thinks that kingship / government are inherently dangerous and evil.

A Person Might Not Want to be Told What to Do

However, as (perhaps) Black points to, another dimension of pursuing libertarianism is out of a love of not having anyone else tell you what to do. Is there any validity to this impulse and are there any dangers to it?

[This will connect to the validity of self-determination:] Maybe there's a validity to the faculty that people have of caring about things. It's not absolute, but we could say that it is *prima facie* valid. If you care about something, you should care about it, unless there's a good reason not to.

I read a book a number of years ago which has stuck with me, by Sheena Iyengar, called *The Art of Choosing*. I'm not good at remembering exactly what books say versus what I think of occasioned by them, but either way, I was left with the thought "what I really care about are the things that I want to be able to choose myself" ["what I want to choose myself are or relate to the things that I really care about" is a clearer way to express what I meant]. There's a correlation between caring, finding valuable, and wanting to make sure things turn out according to your caring.

In much of my life I don't have strong preferences, but at the time I read the book I realized that the freedom to think about whatever subjects I needed to think about was really important to me, to the extent that I couldn't get married and have a family, because I couldn't risk being committed to a high-paying job (to support them) that would monopolize my thinking. Iyengar was raised as a Sikh and raises the prospect of arranged marriage in the book. I discovered, while thinking about the book (working through an exercise in it) that I didn't mind the thought of arranged marriage in itself. (If somehow it didn't threaten my "freedom" of thought!) [It looks like I make demands on reality: freedom of thought.]

I put "freedom" in quotes because I am not really free. My thinking is as constrained as anything. I don't choose the things that speak to me. *They* speak to me. It's because my thinking is constrained by something that is not legible to society that I need freedom from society. I understand that it's fair for society to ask me to not make trouble, in exchange, so generally I do abide by basically liberal ideas of "my rights end at the point that I want to constrain other people's liberty". So given all that, I am happy that I live in a relatively liberal setting (the people around me generally give me space, and I am free to be an individual and not get caught up in a group's undertow.)

I don't think that is quite the same as the potential strawpeople who say "I don't want the government to take my guns and make me use a vaccine". But I can relate to people like that. I want to be left alone to be myself. It's an understandable human desire, and it's *prima facie* valid. If you've never had the misfortune to have someone close to you try to tear down who you are, it's like having someone reach into your brain and put their fingers in

it, breaking the interlocking parts of it, re-engineering you when you express who you really are. Even if someone is wrong, tearing down that wrongness at all costs tears them down as a person, just like even if someone is living in the wrong house, setting it on fire to smoke them out could kill them. We should have defenses against other people trying to change us.

(In a previous post, I brought up the idea of "ego-respect" vs. "survival-respect". "I deserve respect" in the "ego-respect" sense can be the sort of thing gang members say to justify killing people over (some meaning of) honor. But in the "survival-respect" sense, it can be what abused people can say to justify getting away from their abuser. It can be a little bit unclear sometimes if a given case of respect being called for is ego-respect or survival-respect, and being too good at clamping down on ego-respect can threaten survival-respect (maybe being too supportive of survival-respect can feed ego-respect?). Similarly, there could be an analogous phenomenon of ego-freedom vs. survival-freedom.)

God creates us (and makes us) to be who we are -- so to an extent, that is not something that is anyone else's business.

However, it is true that people are not born loving God with all of their beings. Obviously we do have to change. And perhaps the libertarians or anti-vaxxers, in distrusting change as it comes from leftists or liberals, are really distrusting change of themselves in general and therefore are at risk of shutting out God's voice.

Maybe all of this pales in comparison with whether we love God

A lot of what I've said above seems a bit orthogonal to what really matters (for instance, it's not clear to me that my preference for thinking my own thoughts -- if it is not a constraint that I don't choose -- is necessarily better than being caught up in a group's thinking, nor, at the same time, that being a member of a group is better than being an individual). But this issue of potentially not trusting change itself [change in itself] seems to directly connect. People really could be setting themselves up for not connecting to God, through politics. Whatever they prefer over total commitment to God is an idol, and whatever prevents them from connecting to God, whether they understand that that [that preventing] is what is going on or not, may further idolatry or prevent full love of God. (The thing to watch for is, when we go to tear down other people's idols and set their temples on fire, that we aren't trying to shoo them into our temples to worship our idols.)

A lot of what we talk about is orthogonal to whether we love and trust God, or only somewhat "at-angles" to it.

Summary / Keeping Score

I have trouble staying on topic sometimes, so I will try to take a moment to keep score. Let's say that the topic of "does 'kingship' seem like a bad thing to you?" is the point of this post so far.

I said that I can see value in firm, consistent government in terms of its ability to suppress violent gangs, who seem to be the default rulers when there is no government. (Maybe this only seems to be true and isn't always true?) This is in line with what libertarians want, since all (except the most radical) accept some kind of state -- perhaps a firm, consistent one.

I claimed that liberals and libertarians tend to have a dark view on life (particularly on power and the concentration of power), while the post-liberals / Christian humanists tend to have a not-as-dark view on life, power, concentration of power. By having higher expectations, post-liberals / Christian humanists could actually bring about a better government, proving their expectations valid and showing that kingship (even as a case of the concentration of power) can be a good thing.

Then in the next section I considered whether libertarianism (or liberal values in general) might be valid, and how they might be dangerous. I said they might be valid as expressions for protecting the integrity of individuals (the *prima facie* validity of caring about what you care about and being yourself). Also, God has rights over people which trump the social order. However, a danger of liberal / libertarian values (or of protecting who you are from the interference of others) is to be unwilling or unable to change at all (to not value change in general) and thus to be unable to listen to the voice of God.

I realized at that point that much (or all?) of the discussion preceding the recognition of that danger didn't necessarily matter. People prefer this, or that. But the really fundamental issue is whether people connect to God.

That is a good point to remember, and I should return to it later. But for now, I'll resume my discussion of the value of kingship (in light of alternatives to it like libertarianism).

Kingship and Individual Liberty May Not Have to Conflict

Maybe kingship and individual liberty (or even libertarianism?) are not in conflict, or are not as much as one might initially suppose?

I have defended some of what liberalism ostensibly defends [individual freedom], and that's how I can appreciate liberalism. But a king doesn't have to constrain people in any kind of absolute or granular way -- and historically, even earthly ones hardly could have, given their resources.

Maybe they could have within their own courts? But that is them acting on an interpersonal level. (Ironically, for me, I may not care so much about the government, as I do about the social order [like the king acting as just another member of the royal social circle, the scene of humans relating human to human, rather than as wielder of vast state power], and yet my experiences with the social order might inform my (mild) appreciation for the possibility of libertarianism. (Or my lack of outrage against it.))

That's a practical reason [limited resources] why kings do not constrain liberty even if they want to. What if kings just decided that they weren't going to constrain their subjects' liberty? Is it that simple? I'm reminded of a vivid image from the effective altruists. One AI safety researcher (Buck Shlegeris):

> [Context: illustrations of the principle "problems solve themselves".]
>
> Another one is: "Most people have cars. It would be a tremendous disaster if everyone bought cars which had guns in the steering wheels such that if you turn on the accelerator, they shoot you in the face. That could kill billions of people." And I'm like, yep. But people are not going to buy those cars because they don't want to get shot in the face. (source)

Aren't humans reasonable? Don't we want a nice world? Don't we not want to shoot ourselves in the face? Or even make things that could shoot other people in the face? Won't we want to design systems of government that work, or raise up people to be in positions of government who don't do a bad job? So why can't kings just not abuse their positions of power? Obviously they do sometimes. But they don't always, not maximally. And arguably kings (or whoever is in government), start their lives wishing to do the most good, but when in office have to deal with "realities" (like violent gangs which are hard to imagine controlling without violence, or the Molochian dynamics of having to maintain a strong (capitalist) economy, in order to support a strong military, to keep other countries from invading). If we zoom out and squint, humanity as a whole is good, full of well-intentioned people. And this is even true of people in government -- as long as they don't forget who they really are.

Those are some ideas about how earthly governments (even kings) could just not in practice use their authority to be abusive. [Reasons why] if we are consequentialists [if we are considering consequences], we don't have to worry about the spiritual reality of authority leading to abusive outcomes. I am unsure whether post-liberals want to restore monarchy on earth (I don't know enough to say either way), but it is not their most obvious emphasis. I would guess that they are more into being culturally

non-liberal more so than legally or politically non-liberal (granted that "political" might be hard to separate from "cultural" sometimes). [So I don't know how likely a literal inauguration of monarchy is, given their ambitions. Still, I can allow that in practice, kings do not have to be abusive.] However, the important topic to consider is "is kingship [as a value] bad, and how does it fare against alternative values?" and the specific occasion for all of this is "What about Judges? What about Jesus' kingship? What about kingship seen through a spiritual lens?" [What aspects of kingship are good or bad, not just from a secular or humanist perspective (the "abusive" above) but from a radically theistic perspective?]

King as Legislator Yields Libertarian Kingdom

I don't think it's impossible to imagine a world which is, from a human's eye view of how the world works, libertarian, but in which in fact Jesus is king. The thing that allows for authority in the absence of external coercion or direction is an internalized law (and whatever is epiconceptual / episcriptural / "epilegal" to that law). That's more or less what I had in mind when I first replied to Black ("maybe libertarianism is the best and we are not worthy of it"). The king writes the law and we keep it -- no need for police forces or any kind of coercion. I think libertarianism (in an idealistic form) may long for a world where people are free to do what they want. And I think that's a good thing, just so long as they are keeping the law.

So I could reveal myself now to be defending a position of "laws are better than direct involvement -- the king is more legislator and facilitator of adoption of legislation than he is direct leader". I am unsure that I want to defend that position so baldly, that I should define myself as taking that side. But for now I'll say it's my view -- certainly I lean toward it.

My Church of Christ background probably connects to my views

This emphasis of mine on law and hands-off kingship has a lot to do with my upbringing. I was raised in a Church of Christ (a somewhat unusually free-thinking and moderate one). The Churches of Christ are very American in some ways (for instance, they have no denominational structure), but also very un-American (they like obedience and law). They are hyper-Protestant (Sola Scriptura to the point of rejecting theology) and also anti-Protestant (they are fairly okay with saying "salvation is by faith and works" and believe that undergoing a physical act (baptism) is a necessary part of salvation). One of the classic Church of Christ doctrines is that the Holy Spirit's actions on Christians are solely through them reading the Bible that he wrote, like if you had a pen pal whose sole actions on your mind were through writing letters or emails.

Most of the really "pungent" Church of Christ doctrines were not taught or emphasized in the church I grew up in, but when I discover them later, I think "yes, I like this emphasis". Perhaps I am genetically Church of Christ (plausible since both my parents and three of my grandparents are/were members). However, I am not sure I would want to be dogmatically in favor of all the points given in the previous paragraph. Notably, I don't think the Holy Spirit's actions are only carried out through us reading the book he left behind. However, I think that's a good dimension to consider, that the Word of God -- not just in some mystical, spiritually empowered, supernaturally gracious sense, but just the (relatively) plain sentences that we can understand like we can understand a pen pal's email, is the action of God on us, is God's presence and power. This view leans toward "God is your friend" rather than "God is great and powerful" (which I think follows from the polar opposite view of the Holy Spirit, which would be like a hyper-Pentecostalism (that is, the view that the Spirit is only tongues of fire, rushing winds, prophecies, and whatever else the Pentecostals restored and which the cessationists deny. I would guess that there aren't any real hyper-Pentecostals, that Pentecostals all acknowledge the quieter voice of the Spirit.)).

What is the Real Issue?

"God as friend" connects (in my mind) to the idea that God is kin, and that we know him by kinship. So internalizing his values is more valuable than being ruled over by him. I doubt Black would object to that idea, so maybe if there remains a difference between me and her, it could be in something like "how should government look on earth?" or "how should we relate to the idea of kingship?" or "how should we relate to the idea of law?"

Is it "How should government look on earth?"

At the time of writing this, I don't know that I have a strong preference for any given government on earth. (Maybe against abusive ones, but not for any particular non-abusive one -- some idea of what I mean about abuse being given earlier in this post. [For instance, abuse as violating the integrity of an individual.]) I suppose the ideal earthly government would be one in which all the adults were holy people with God's interests first in their minds and actions, and the only challenge remaining being the education of young people to become such adults, and maintaining physical sustainability. A non-coercive government would exist to coordinate large-scale resources. It wouldn't have to be coercive because everyone would of one mind. The only coercive government would be that of children being ruled by their parents or teachers, and only to the extent necessary. That sounds fairly libertarian to me, although maybe it sounds like some other label if you take it vaguely enough. However, the ideal earthly government may never be possible, and in the meantime I don't have a strong preference -- for instance, the US government is pretty good

in many ways, but it may not be the best.

My vague vision of ideal earthly government does not sound like one that falls out of the bounds of Christian humanism (as I understand it), and I guess that it is not a sticking point between me and Black. Again, I don't have a strong preference and would be willing to live under different governments, likely whatever else could fall within the bounds of Christian humanism.

Is it "How should we relate to the ideas of kingship and law?"

This leaves the questions of "how should we relate to the ideas of kingship? and law?" I don't really know Black, but I'll give some different perspectives on kingship and law that occur to me, some of which may (or may not) happen to apply to her. These are probably strawmen to some extent. (These are guesses and are likely not the full picture.)

One reason why kingship could be emphasized is to keep humans down. Humans need to know that they must think small and keep perspective that they are not God, they are not king. Because there is a God, they are not God and because there is a king, they are not king. Keeping humans down is a good thing (maybe) because humility is the chief virtue. Humble people are the most beautiful people and we can trust them interpersonally. The real danger in the spiritual life is pride.

Keeping humans down is a very attractive view -- humans seem to like it a lot. I don't think it's really Jesus' main emphasis. I would warn Christians away from it to the extent that it keeps people from using their talents to the full, and places humility even above the love of God among the virtues. If we are maximally humble (at least for an obvious meaning of "humble"), how can we claim to know the truth? So humility could alienate people from God.

But a more steelman version could be "Jesus as king tells us not to keep ourselves down, and because he's king, we obey." I guess you could say that laws also keep humans down / humble them. [Kings and laws can both support and undermine "keep humans down".] So that's not the real sticking point between me and Black. But maybe if laws are emphasized, it could become the case that humans don't need the king-relationship as much, that while God is king, that's not really something that God regards. It's like if your dad was really good at something, and you knew you'll never be that good at it no matter how long you lived, and he knew it too, and he would never put you in the position to do his job, but he didn't really care about his own competence and it barely came up because he could talk to you so freely, given all the things you have in common because you grew up to be like him [law teaches kinship (sonship / daughtership)]. In your relationship with God, his kingship is less relevant

to both him and you than your mutual kinship. (Perhaps a good illustration of the phenomenon of unlike people being kin comes from Ursula K. LeGuin.)

Another reason why kingship could be emphasized is because humans need a power-figure in their lives, and God (as king) represents one. Pentecostalism is very popular in the developing world, and from the little I have seen of it online, it seems like there can be a desperation for the power of God, because people in the developing world are often desperate. I wouldn't want to get in the way of what allows a desperate person to function. So there's a *prima facie* value to the psychological support given to people who (in a sense) need a power-figure -- maybe really need it at that time of their lives.

(Later: maybe "people in the developing world are often desperate" is less true than "sometimes desperate"? Also, do I expect that this post will never find its way to someone who (apparently or really) needs to consider God to be a maximally powerful being in order to hold their life together? If I think it could, how would I contextualize all of this to make it somehow not too destabilizing? More details may perhaps be found below, but I could say, briefly, that as long as you are true to God, no matter how bad things are in this life, you will someday participate in his rest, and God is always present in your life. No matter how bad things are, you can always love God. There are other bad outcomes besides what may happen to you -- other people may not remain true to God -- but they are not under your control, are not your responsibility. They belong to God. Your responsibility is to obey God. If someone else is lost, you may mourn, but you will be okay, overall. Your mourning will not overwhelm you, and you will affirm it out of love, rather than be subject to it as a slave to automatic emotional reactivity.)

Which is better for developing trust, hands-off, or hands-on government?

One of my tweets claimed that trust in God was aided by a more hands-off approach. I think the lived lives of people (in developing countries or in ours) is that, if both our theism biases and atheism biases aren't dominating how we see the way things plainly look, sometimes it looks like God is hands-on, and sometimes hands-off -- sometimes his intervention in the world in which we are forced to care ("lived life") is present, sometimes absent (absent to the point that we doubt that he exists sometimes).

Which produces more trust in God, when God is hands-on, or hands-off? Trust is complicated. It is inhibited by betrayal (the fruit of a hands-off world). But it is also inhibited by satiation and perfect safety. If things worked out okay, we wouldn't trust as deeply. *We* wouldn't trust as deeply,

we wouldn't be as alive to trust. Trust is connection as well as acceptance. We have to care in order to trust the most. So *we* have to engage with reality. All that to say that some mixture of hands-on and hands-off is needed and that "king" versus "judge" are at different points on the same scale. "Judge" (or, God as king as in the days of Judges) says "more hands-off", while "king" (or, Saul/David/Solomon(/Jesus?) as king) says "more hands-on". (Or for "hands-on" we can also add "more firm and consistent" and for "hands-off" "less firm and consistent / less established".)

The danger of wealth

Unlike developing-world Pentecostals (as I understand them), the spiritual reality that has been my problem has not been poverty or powerlessness. Rather, fakeness is what has driven me, which I think connects to the ideas of satiation and perfect safety inhibiting caring and therefore trust and life. I suspect that in some ways, I'm living in the future, in the hyper-developed world. So to me, becoming real has been a kind of life challenge, and to internalize a law (plus its epiconcept or "epilaw") allows me to become real. The danger for a developing-country Christian is to be weighed down by poverty (and perhaps from that despair and turn away from God) or to turn to sin out of desperation and then maybe come to love it (a real danger for narcotraffickers), but for me it is to [be] turned into a spiritually dead person by wealth. I don't think about fakeness anymore (although I think I would if I tried abandoning my values), but instead I am concerned that I won't be true to my values, that I will sink into a state where life is nice and I don't deeply care about God. A God who was too hands-on would prevent me from being hungry for him, would allow me to become numb through ease and pleasure. So I desire poverty in general, and this can connect to the poverty of not having a king (or of having a Judges-era God as king rather than one more like Saul, David, or Solomon), of having a worldview in which the ideal government is not firm and consistent, so that instead I rely on God.

Could a king decree "you are real!" and it would be so? The related questions of "Could God decree 'you are sinless' and cause you to be seen that way by him?" or "Could God zap you and make you in fact sinless?" could be (or maybe have been) big controversies in Christianity. I think most Christians think that God can zap you and make you sinless, or at least that seems fitting with the Christian culture I've seen. Otherwise how could anyone go to heaven? And I agree with the existing Holiness movement (as I understand it) that we receive holiness from God, that it is God who makes us not have our sinful habits. But, that's only part of the story, because we have to repent of our own sins ourselves. *We* have to acquire the values of God, and that's something he can't do for us, or else it would be *he* who valued them. Our sinful habits may keep us out of heaven and be something God can deal with unilaterally, but our misaligned values are something only we can do anything about, so that it

is *we* who [come to] love God. So a king who wanted kinship (someone as real as him) would do better with laws than with direct intervention.

The value of poverty

Though I said earlier that the ideal earthly government is one which is sustainable and focused on education, that situation sounds fairly stable, calm, and thus psychologically wealthy, a temptation to no longer deeply care. So I think for such a government to seem trustworthy to me, though in itself it may be stable, calm, and functional, the culture around it would have to emphasize the insufficiency of wealth, to mourn the loss of poverty, to feel the lack of lack. Even feel the lack of chaos, terror, and horror, saying "When we were afraid, we turned to you with all of our beings, but we are no longer afraid. How unfortunate we have become." (Or which may be the case for many of us "When we were afraid, we had the opportunity to turn to you with all of our beings, but we did not take it, and now we are no longer afraid. How unfortunate we have become.") Poverty is hunger, and hunger cares.

I think a natural rebuttal to poverty being needed to value God is to bring up gratitude. When we are wealthy, we redeem it with gratitude, by being thankful to God for how good our lives are. Maybe with gratitude we can turn to God with all of our beings. I don't think it's as natural to as deeply turn to God out of a sense of gratitude than out of fear (what I think of when I think of "deeply" touches on a different part of a person than gratitude does). I think of the closeness that a child might feel with his or her parent after being comforted after a serious upset. But maybe for other people it's different, or could be different in an ideal society where we are trained to interpret things properly. However, even in heaven there's something missing, something lost, if we want to get a lot out of the verse that says "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13). In heaven we can no longer have the greatest love, a casualty of everyone remaining having been completely saved. So, along with the lost who will never be alive again, God could mourn the loss of part of himself, part of love itself.

(Also, true gratitude may necessarily be a form of poverty as deep as that of turning to God in fear, and many (or all?) of us may need the lived experience of poverty in order to develop it.)

So if kingship is an attempt to have an established government that prevents psychological poverty, or if a love of kingship is an attempt to make that true in the space of one's own valuing life, then it might be better to value less-established governments, "judge-like" (like the way things are when God is king, rather than the way things are when humans are king).

Closing Section

In the above, I tried to say that God would prefer to relate to us as friend and father, and that by means of law (hands-off kingship / king as legislator rather than direct leader) we learn how to become like God, fully mature and thus capable of deeper relationship with him. From that, I would say that I have an ambivalent relationship with the idea of "kingship". I don't deny that there is such a thing as kingship, or authority, and while I have a personal taste for law, I don't think that either that or kingship are really very interesting in the end, though they may persist eternally. Such spiritual realities are means to the end of a familial and friendly relationship with God, a simple intimacy.

What I could try to do, and, as noted below, may try to do in the future, is read through Judges and the books that talk about the kings of Israel, and perhaps other parts of the Bible, to see if there are any clues as to why God would prefer the somewhat anarchic Judges days over, say, the settled and established days of Solomon. My guess for now is that the reasons given above, or some of them, may have something to do with why God preferred to be that kind of king (a more hands-off one) than to use more established governments like those of Saul, David, and Solomon. God may share with libertarians some of their values, and prefer a kingship that offers liberty and insecurity, which can be the foundations for love and trust of God. When we choose too little freedom and too much security (or if we have an atheistic liberty and insecurity as the foundation of government), we reject God as king over us.

More considerations of wealth and establishedness

There is a difference between libertarian and Judges-like government. Liberty at the expense of security might plausibly be libertarian values for some meaning of "security", (i.e. favoring the insecurity of not knowing if you have a job [will be able to find a job] rather than of wondering whether your contract will be enforced), but most libertarians (I would guess) value wealth, and think that wealth (in the form of liberty, or economic wealth) should follow from ideal government, whereas I think God (as love) would be ambivalent about wealth, and wealth would not be the main point of his government.

Isn't wealth basically that which God created in the beginning and called good, and even very good? Arguably so, but there's a mixedness to that goodness. In the very fact that it is so good, it becomes a temptation to be valued more than God. Perhaps God creates wealth so that we have something difficult to renounce (or become genuinely and fully willing to renounce) in favor of him, so that our love is even more tested to the point of reality, than if it was only tempted by being confronted by suffering or poverty.

Now, to circle back to the beginning where I mentioned the situation in the Northern Triangle... does God prefer that over the state of affairs in the

United States, if he preferred Judges-era Israel over Solomon-era Israel? One could argue that God is not as much king in the Northern Triangle as he was in the time of Judges, and that would give an easy way to decide. If the United States is not under God's kingship (except in the sense that all reality is) and neither is the Northern Triangle, then we might as well minimize horror, since horrors are evil, and in that way do what God wants. But I could say in reply that rates of Christianity are high in the Northern Triangle (greater than 80% in all three countries as of the 2010s). Maybe the people there are gaining spiritually, despite living under the terror and futility-making of the gangs.

It's interesting that Jesus says, in Luke 6:

> 24 "But woe to you who are rich! For you have received your consolation. 25 Woe to you, you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 Woe, when men speak well of you, for their fathers did the same thing to the false prophets.

Maybe poverty is a blessing that God will share with all of us fairly. This perspective does make it hard to evaluate altruism. Is it right to alleviate the poverty of chaos and evil in the Northern Triangle (if we could figure out how)? It doesn't sound like the worst thing you could do. But is it a really necessary thing? The people there (other than those who perpetrate the evil according to their own wills) are storing up all the blessings of the beatitudes, which are the counterpart to the "woes" in Luke 6. What is it that is really up-for-grabs, a site for gain or loss, such that if we increase things on some axis, things actually get better for people in God's eyes, and if we decrease along that axis, things actually get worse?

I would think that holiness, closeness to God, and the like are that axis that should be maximized, and that the case for suppressing gangs in the Northern Triangle would be to keep the gang members away from the intense temptations of gangs, and allow them to find the anti-temptations of their culture's Christians (when those Christians are at their best), or whatever other source of anti-temptation they might encounter, which the gravity of gang life draws them away from. It could well be possible to suppress gangs without people turning to God, but in principle, it might help.

What could be done for the United States? One way to look at the United States is that we are stuck with an established social order, a firm and consistent government, because it simply is unnatural for people to choose otherwise. In a way, we should hope that is not true, lest we fall into some kind of situation where we feel morally / socially compelled to trade away all freedom and trust in God for safety and pleasantness, because our preference for the United States' establishedness over the Northern

Triangle's lack of establishedness comes from our ingrained social value of safety and pleasantness. It may not be the case that we value the United States' government for that reason, and thinking optimistically, maybe we can say "no" to the psychological fuels of consumerism (hedonism and preference satisfaction) even if it currently is our reason for such valuing. So maybe (theoretically) we have a choice (one which we may even have practically in the future) as to which world to live in -- we could choose a less-established world, one more like the Northern Triangle and less like the United States.

Should we take that opportunity? I find it difficult to say yes -- perhaps I am too much a product of my biology and culture. If I can't say yes, I can offer something like what was mentioned above, where we realize in a deep way the insufficiency of our developed earthly lives. We might spend the time that we currently do on entertainment to contemplate how lacking our safe, comfortable world is, how it is not ideally tuned toward producing holiness and love of God, the only fruits of this life that matter in the end. Try as we might to replace stress and risk with anti-temptations, there is a dimension of love that we will seldom if ever experience if we never pursue and undergo the cross. We will have made discipleship of Jesus obsolete (to some extent this is already the case).

It might be possible to say yes [to the choice of a less-established government] if we were all (or generally all) Christians (given that young people are in some sense not born Christian) and we thought of our civilization pursuing the cross by disestablishing, in order to rely on God more. We might think of it as civilizational trust. We wouldn't rely on the machinery of government to enforce laws, but on how we instill those laws in each other, most essentially on the extent to which they are written in us through our own consent. This would be a case of the cross (risking death for the sake of others) if a Judges-like government led to greater trust in God and thus lower rates of people failing to really love God.

Conclusion of Part 1

I have reached the end of what I had to say, more or less off the top of my head, and now I am curious to see what the Bible actually says. So, as I thought I might in previous paragraphs, I will read Judges and the following books up to the end of Solomon's reign to get some clues as to why God preferred the judges-era pattern of government over the kings-era one. (I could expand my reading to include the period of time the Israelites were in the wilderness, since it's analogous to Judges, and to read about the kings after Solomon, but that would be a lot of reading, and I'm already delaying the release of this post by a bit by doing as much as I plan to. (Similarly I could try to compare and contrast the less-established eras of church history (first three centuries, persecuted churches, poor churches, churches in chaotic situations) with the more-established (post-

Constantine, national, protected, wealthy churches), but that would be even more reading.) I hope I'm getting a reasonable sample of the difference between less- and more-established governments with the readings I intend to do, at least for now.)

Part 2: Judges, Saul, David, Solomon

Having read the Bible, and reflected, here are my thoughts on God and establishedness.

Three caveats: 1) When I read, I just read the ESV without doing any deeper study. There is some chance that I'm not getting what a scholar would. Whether this is actually a problem, I'm not sure. I would guess that the ESV is usually not misleading (that's the point of a translation). But I would guess that there are at least a few things I'm missing or getting wrong. 2) I only read Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, and the part of 1 Kings about Solomon. But Exodus through Joshua has similarities with Judges, and the kings after Solomon are often like Solomon in that they are established. Also 1 and 2 Chronicles overlap with the readings about Saul, David, and Solomon. I considered reading all these, but thought that it was better to not put too much time into this post, at the risk of missing some nuance. (And as I went I realized that the entire Bible is relevant to questions of establishedness and disestablishedness.) I hope that the additional readings would not (or will not) overturn too much of what I have seen, but only add details to the same overall picture. 3) I am biased in favor of my own preferences and intuitions. I don't feel like I am (I tried to be fair-minded in the verses I highlighted and conclusions I drew), but I know that I am.

(Therefore this post is not a maximally-established thing in itself, and calls for some kind of improvement or criticism.)

My method in reading the selected passages was to look for and elaborate on references to the concepts of establishedness, disestablishedness, establishment, establishing, and disestablishing, both psychological and political, as well as to references to God's intervention. A rough definition of establishedness is "the state of having been made so, put together, organized, given a place" (and also some connection to whatever else the common meaning of "established" is). A rough definition of "establishment" is "a thing that continually establishes something". I assume that psychological establishedness is the bedrock reality, and political establishedness emerges from that (and then turns around and affects individual psychological establishedness). (If all the soldiers are afraid, the army is less established -- it is weaker, less organized, less a body of people.) I found that there were situations in my reading that were "mixed". ("Mixed" things, in themselves, call for feelings of ambivalence, just as ambiguous things call for a sense of uncertainty or undefined

thought.)

I was interested in the following questions: what is the difference between the Judges-era of God's kingship and the human kings-era of God's kingship from a spiritual perspective? Why might God have preferred the Judges-era? Did God intervene more, or less, in one era or another? I thought that the main spiritual difference between the Judges era and the Kings era was establishedness. The really important field (with respect to establishedness) is establishedness on an individual level, but political establishedness affects this. With a king, a political body is more established than under a succession of judges. So that is why I focused on the theme of establishedness.

I think the idea of establishedness might be a good, general one. I found myself taking it different places in the text. I am not sure it is the best concept, and will only endorse it (for now) within the context of this post. (My uncertainty about it being something like: Why does this exact concept need to exist? Is there a better mapping of relevant phenomena to a name?)

My New Wine Background

One piece of my intellectual background that's worth mentioning here is the story of my acquaintance with and adoption of the New Wine System. When I was in college, and just out of it, I spent a number of years (maybe five?) puzzling (at times) over soteriological verses from the New Testament. "Salvation is by grace through faith apart from works, so that no man can boast" says Ephesians. "People are justified by works and not by faith alone" says James. "The work of God is to believe the one he sent" says John. "God wants everyone to be saved" says 1 Timothy. I thought of the different theological positions I understood (somewhat) at the time: Church of Christ, Catholic, Reformed, Arminian Baptist. The Reformed did pretty good with Ephesians (God is the one who saves, 100%), but really bad with 1 Timothy in combination with Ephesians (unless they were universalists, but I didn't think universalism was biblical). The Arminian Baptists had figured out a way to reconcile Ephesians and 1 Timothy (those who choose to have faith are saved, apart from works), except that them saying that people needed to have faith meant that those people were doing the "work" of faith (John), and obviously they could boast about it. (They could just choose not to, but they could also just choose not to boast about other works, so if the "not boasting" thing is the point of the Ephesians verse, it must be really hard to just not boast.) The Catholics and Churches of Christ did pretty good with James, but not so good with Ephesians.

I thought that everyone had difficulties interpreting scripture, and I came up with my own weird way to reconcile things (when we obey, we do God's will, so we are nothing but God acting in the world, but when we

disobey, then it is we who act -- a view I found out later was similar to Lutheran monergism).

At some point, I faced the possibility of people (a particular person) who seemed basically good going to hell, just because they (he) weren't (wasn't) a Christian. My mind remembered the universalist-leaning verse "every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord", and I looked it up, and saw that it came originally from Isaiah. I searched on a popular Internet search engine, for the verse in Isaiah, and discovered the site for the New Wine System. It looked similar to how it does now (I found it in fall of 2012), offering resolution of scriptural difficulties. It talked about a different kind of soteriology, referencing the verse in Isaiah. I was interested, and thought that it might have (what I would now call) high expected value. So I ordered the comprehensive exposition of it (*New Wine for the End Times*) and read it.

I was first impressed by how it handled the issues that I had coming in to reading it. My opinion at the time was that it dealt with the verses mentioned above, and others, in a more natural way than the stretchings that I suspected or had heard people making to get around the apparently plain meaning of each verse. It gave a place for otherwise obscure passages in its own context. Also, it offered a scriptural reason to think that God wouldn't (in keeping with his 1 Timothy desire that all people be saved) create people who through no fault of their own were never adequately preached the gospel, and who therefore would have to go to hell.

But ultimately it was the part that I had least desire for going in that had the greatest effect on me. The New Wine System is about the Millennium. The Millennium exists to bring people to holiness, full spiritual maturity (so that they no longer have any sinful habits, and (I would now emphasize), they fully put God first in their hearts -- and possibly full spiritual maturity encompasses other dimensions as well). It inherently provides a scriptural explanation of where, for instance, people who died in pre-contact traditional cultures could hear about Jesus. If the Millennium solves that problem, it does so by "preaching" holiness -- the Millennium exists both to include people and to bring them to completed spiritual maturity. In most Christian cultures, holiness is not necessary for salvation, but in the New Wine System it is.

This can be a powerful idea for anyone (I have some ideas for why it might ought to be, here), but it was particularly powerful for me. I had already had some interest in the idea of designing better ideologies for altruistic purposes, and this seemed to me to be an excellent way to motivate people to be more altruistic. The idea was so powerful and obviously useful, and also so Biblical (from what I could see at the time), that I ran with it for years. I developed a natural theological support for it (which, is somewhat helpfully sketched out on this blog), to the point that now I think imagining a God who is not in many ways compatible with the New Wine

System doesn't make as much sense, from a philosophical standpoint, than imagining one who is.

Now it's been about 9 years since I initially read about the New Wine System, and I have some uncertainty whether it is actually biblical. I think the developer of the New Wine System may really have shown it to be so, but I am a more critical reader now, and I'm more aware of the possibility of Bible scholarship overturning an apparently "plain reading" of Scripture. I think the developer did engage with more than just the most plain (or naive) layer of Scripture study, but I wonder if Bible scholarship could still overwhelm his theory. I am considering re-reading *New Wine for the End Times*, but am not sure I understand enough about Bible scholarship to make an effective reading of it for the purpose of being critical.

(However, scholarship may be overrated. We haven't had cutting-edge Bible scholarship, which has the latest, most authoritative take on the original context and how the Bible fits into it, until (by definition of "cutting-edge"), this exact historical moment. So was all thinking about God fatally flawed and useless over the centuries between the original reception of the Bible and right now? If scholarship can overturn soteriologically-relevant doctrines, that seems to be a big problem for the past (or for us now, given that scholarship could, at least in theory, overturn them again). We could be misleading ourselves or other people about how to properly relate to God. God obviously was on some level okay with people seeking him without having the best conceivable scholarship, and, in fact, this doesn't seem to be much of a biting of the bullet on a New Wine view of soteriology. If it is true, it's okay, or more okay, if we don't know how salvation works.)

(Also, I am not sure that we should view the Bible as something revealed to the first century (or to Ancient Judaism), in no way progressive. *A priori*, I don't see why I should be sure it should be seen as an ancient truth to be handed down, high fidelity, to the present, or whether it's supposed to be reinterpreted by people in the present or future. I might be somewhat of a progressive Christian, by entertaining this thought. I think the difference between me and the usual progressive Christianity that I see is that I bend the Bible (to the extent that I might, if the New Wine System turns out to not be the most conservative reading after all) toward a rationalist "theism" ("theism" as an ethical orientation toward God's well-being and interests, by contrast with "humanism" as an ethical orientation toward human well-being and interests), through my natural theology, while they bend the Bible (to the extent they do) toward a more secular humanism.)

So, given that as my background, I have I think an unusual take on what matters. Maximizing holiness (a concept which could be a container for all sorts of ways of being set apart to God: growing into spiritual maturity, overcoming sins, loving and trusting God, setting aside idols of whatever

form, being fully disposed to obey God, pursuing and/or undergoing the cross, and I would guess other congruent concepts and phenomena) is ultimately necessary for salvation, and we should live like it. The New Wine eschatology (the Millennium) allows this to be entirely realistic. What is really dangerous is that which gets in the way of completing the journey. Being satisfied, permanently, at 99% of the way, is death. Or, whatever gets you to permanently stop growing, at any level of maturity. Likewise, if anything causes you to be an enemy of God, that is dangerous, and to become a permanent enemy of God is death. (In the end, it's enmity that kills. Those who refuse to grow all the way will eventually be forced to confront that fact, and either choose to listen to God after all, or choose to be permanent enemies). One would hope that the 1000 years of the Millennium could undo damage done during the ~40-80 years on earth, but likely enough not, in some cases, and that risk is worth trying to address. People can acquire enmities with God or cherishings of idols that are hard to undo.

(Salvation could be defined as "how it is we end up in heaven and not in hell". The New Wine view (which I think is supported by natural theology) is that hell is temporary, ending in annihilation. Over the long run, certainly over eternity, God in his holiness can't endure any unholiness at all, so any holding onto sin (putting anything ahead of God in our hearts), must cease, and if we make it so that we hold onto it and never let go, then God must destroy us at some point.)

I've been a reader of Slate Star Codex (now reborn as Astral Codex Ten) since fall of 2016. A speaker at a philosophy club presented short-termist effective altruism to me in 2013, an influential event on me. In 2020 and part of 2021, I read the Effective Altruism Forum a lot. I've been thinking about rationalist/EA ideas since 2013, more so since 2016. I spent time developing views that related the New Wine system and my natural theology to their concerns: the future, ethics, civilization, and perhaps others. I am concerned (as I've somewhat expressed here) that if humans get what they want (satisfy ethical humanism (or humanism + "zooism", as is not-too-uncommon in secular spaces nowadays), they may damage the prospects of people to adequately put God first. (In reality, putting God first is what ethical humanism calls for, if it takes God into consideration -- ethical theism satisfies ethical humanism). Human civilization seeks establishedness, almost by definition. But establishedness, especially highly optimized establishedness (both political and psychological) could be dangerous -- strangely enough, more dangerous in the end than the deaths caused by the genocides of the 20th century (which didn't by themselves keep their victims out of heaven). And, in principle, as unnecessary as those deaths, and as apparently up to human initiative to prevent.

This causes me to have "priors" (a viewpoint going in to my investigation)

which cause me to be concerned with the danger of bad establishedness, and to be more favorable to the prospect of good disestablishedness. Establishedness is attractive and a natural end state for human psychology, and if people settle on an end state which is not sufficiently connected to God, that's dangerous. Disestablishedness is often inherently unstable and unattractive, not what we gravitate toward. But it is our (only?) hope (either through human initiative, or through purely divine intervention) to break us out of bad establishednesses.

Synopsis

A brief synopsis of the portion of the Bible covered:

In Judges, Israel goes through cycles. They turn away from God, go into a kind of "mini-Captivity" (a political disestablishment), ruled over by neighboring kings, cry out to God, he raises up a temporary ruler for them (a judge), the land has rest for a while, then the people turn away and the cycle repeats. This has its upsides and its downsides. It's apparently the form of government that God originally wanted. But it does allow for some terrible things to happen (as noted at the end of the book).

In 1 Samuel, the people get tired of this way of doing things and want a permanent ruler (a king) set up over them, just like all the other nations. God is unhappy about this but goes along with what they say. He gives them a first king who isn't really the best king. (Who was kind of obviously not the kind of person to make a good king.) Perhaps God expected this king to do a bad job and motivate the people to turn back from the monarchy? In any case, the king proves himself so bad that even God "regrets" (controversial statement, explored below) having made him king. God gets a better king anointed, and then takes the future of the kingdom away from the first king. But not the kingdom itself, immediately. A long process whereby the king-to-be becomes more established ensues, and the first king is threatened by this and is ultimately disestablished.

In 2 Samuel, the second king rules, consolidates power (establishes the kingdom), but then sins in a major way. God disestablishes him as punishment. The second king struggles with an attempted coup and then re-establishes himself, grows old, and dies.

In 1 Kings, the second king has to establish his chosen son as king (before dying), and then that son, the third king, enjoys the fruits of his (third king's) supervirtue of wisdom (a gift God was pleased to give him), as well as the fact that the land is now at peace (unlike in the second king's day). This third king gets really rich and drafts forced labor to build a temple to God, which God didn't really ask for but goes along with. This king also builds a multi-building palace, using forced labor. He impresses a lot of people (his own people, a foreign queen). He has 700 wives and 300 concubines, some of whom are foreign, some probably political brides to

ensure peace. Some of them turn him away from being true to God, get him to worship foreign gods. God is angry at him for doing that and disestablishes him somewhat. He raises up someone to cause a civil war and take 10/12ths of the nation away from the third king's successor. (That takes us to the end of chapter 11, which is as far as I chose to go.)

I can also add a prelude and postlude to the above synopsis (things I remember from past readings of the rest of the Bible):

Prelude:

First, God existed. Then he created the heavens, earth, and first people. (Established reality.) The people of Israel began long ago as a family consisting of one man (Israel), his two wives and two concubines, and his 12 sons and some number of daughters. God chose them (established them). The family had to go to Egypt because of a famine (disestablishment), where they made a good first impression. But they never assimilated, and as the generations went by and they became populous, the Egyptians felt threatened by them and enslaved them (politically disestablished). They made them work to build things. After many generations of this, an Israelite who had an aristocratic (Egyptian) background, but who had been away being a shepherd, was called to come back and free the people (disestablish Egypt, establish Israel) and lead them out of Egypt. So he did, and the people wandered in the desert (in a disestablished state) for forty years, preparing (spiritually and militarily) (being established by disestablishedness of wandering) to enter the land that Israel and his family had left from to come to Egypt. They enter the land and drive out, kill, and sort of enslave the residents (disestablish them), and this is where Judges begins.

Postlude:

After the third king's reign (in 1 Kings), there was a civil war, resulting in two kingdoms descended from Israel (a disestablishing phenomenon for Israel). The line of the second king and his sons kept a smaller part, while a new dynasty took the larger part. The line of the second king and his sons was sometimes good from God's perspective, while the new dynasty and its successors never was. The good kings turned to God and turned the people to God (establishing of spiritual relationship), while the bad kings turned to foreign gods (establishing of spiritual relationship) and turned the people away from God (disestablishing of spiritual relationship). Both kingdoms were eventually conquered by neighboring empires (the "Captivity") (political disestablishing). The people of Israel remained in various captivities for many centuries. In our day, there has been a revived political state called Israel (political establishment) in which some of the descendants of Israel live, which occupies land once held (and still held) by non-Israelites (disestablishing them). Many of the descendants of Israel are lost, maybe they died out or were assimilated into non-Israelite

populations. So in a sense the captivity has never ended.

God sent his son (also God) to become a human, born to a descendant of the second king. He had a rightful claim to the earthly throne of Israel, but was not recognized by them and wasn't even really going for that. Instead he was shamefully executed by a foreign empire, at the desire of the leaders of Israel. (He disestablished himself to become a human, and disestablished himself to die shamefully.) This was to accomplish at least one of a number of possible spiritual agendas. He rose from the dead a few days later (re-established), spent some time with his friends, and then disappeared, going back to...? Possibly, suffering everything "the least" beings suffer (being disestablished), and sending his Spirit (also God) to do work in the people who consider themselves his followers (being established). These followers created a sort of parallel-Israel and built a big civilization (establishedness), which split, split again in multiple pieces, had civil wars (disestablishedness), persecuted (establishedness) itself and others, was tamed or captivated by a secular (foreign? native?) power (a deceptive disestablishedness), colonized and evangelized the world (establishedness), and overall pursued the God-king's agenda, with mixed success, to the present day.

Episodes

Note on translations

On this blog I use the World English Bible by default, so that is what I use for excerpts, but when I did the reading I read the English Standard Version.

Gideon (Judges 6 - 8)

Judges 6:

> 7 When the children of Israel cried to Yahweh because of Midian, 8 Yahweh sent a prophet to the children of Israel; and he said to them, "Yahweh, the God of Israel, says, 'I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of bondage. 9 I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out from before you, and gave you their land. 10 I said to you, "I am Yahweh your God. You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell." But you have not listened to my voice.'"
>
> 11 Yahweh's angel came and sat under the oak which was in Ophrah, that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite. His son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the

> Midianites. 12 Yahweh's angel appeared to him, and said to him, "Yahweh is with you, you mighty man of valor!"
>
> 13 Gideon said to him, "Oh, my lord, if Yahweh is with us, why then has all this happened to us? Where are all his wondrous works which our fathers told us of, saying, 'Didn't Yahweh bring us up from Egypt?' But now Yahweh has cast us off, and delivered us into the hand of Midian."
>
> 14 Yahweh looked at him, and said, "Go in this your might, and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Haven't I sent you?"

Apparently in the days of Judges, when God alone was king, God could appear pretty hands-off. Effectively, appearing hands-off is to be hands-off on some level (you allow people to think you aren't involved). (So, perhaps, if you see through the eyes of faith or philosophy that God is always active in your life, you enable him on some level to be more hands-on?)

Judges 7:

> 1 Then Jerubbaal, who is Gideon, and all the people who were with him, rose up early and encamped beside the spring of Harod. Midian's camp was on the north side of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley. 2 Yahweh said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel brag against me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' 3 Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.
>
> 4 Yahweh said to Gideon, "There are still too many people. Bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. It shall be, that those whom I tell you, 'This shall go with you,' shall go with you; and whoever I tell you, 'This shall not go with you,' shall not go." 5 So he brought down the people to the water; and Yahweh said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps of the water with his tongue, like a dog laps, you shall set him by himself; likewise everyone who bows down on his knees to drink." 6 The number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people bowed down on their knees to drink water. 7 Yahweh said to Gideon, "I will

> save you by the three hundred men who lapped, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, each to his own place."

When we are disestablished, then we know that God was being hands-on through us.

Judges 8:

> 1 The men of Ephraim said to him, "Why have you treated us this way, that you didn't call us when you went to fight with Midian?" They rebuked him sharply. 2 He said to them, "What have I now done in comparison with you? Isn't the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? 3 God has delivered into your hand the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb! What was I able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger was abated toward him when he had said that.

(Gideon is a descendant of Abiezer.)

Quoting from my notes:

> 8:1 Ephraim is mad that they weren't called to fight. (The established norm of war?) If they had [fought], that might have diluted God's story. The "logical", "right", "best practices" way of doing things is a powerful norm but is not necessarily in favor of trusting in, loving God -- It takes social courage to resist establishment / establishedness.

Judges 8:

> 21 Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "You rise and fall on us; for as the man is, so is his strength." Gideon arose, and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescents that were on their camels' necks.
>
> 22 Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you, your son, and your son's son also; for you have saved us out of the hand of Midian."
>
> 23 Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. Yahweh shall rule over you."

Gideon refuses to be king. The people seem to have had an instinct to

make a king. The disestablishedness of their gratitude? Or perhaps the disestablishedness of their fear, looking at a way to not be afraid (a new establishedness), rooted in Gideon and his house? We want to make humans into our saviors, when we see them save. In Gideon's case, that he saved them was because of God, really, but the people apparently couldn't see that.

God Says He Will Abandon Israel and Then Doesn't (Judges 10)

Judges 10:

> 6 The children of Israel again did that which was evil in
> Yahweh's sight, and served the Baals, the Ashtaroth, the gods
> of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the
> children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines. They
> abandoned Yahweh, and didn't serve him. 7 Yahweh's anger
> burned against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the
> Philistines and into the hand of the children of Ammon. 8
> They troubled and oppressed the children of Israel that year.
> For eighteen years they oppressed all the children of Israel
> that were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites,
> which is in Gilead. 9 The children of Ammon passed over the
> Jordan to fight also against Judah, and against Benjamin, and
> against the house of Ephraim, so that Israel was very
> distressed. 10 The children of Israel cried to Yahweh, saying,
> "We have sinned against you, even because we have forsaken
> our God, and have served the Baals."
>
> 11 Yahweh said to the children of Israel, "Didn't I save you
> from the Egyptians, and from the Amorites, from the children
> of Ammon, and from the Philistines? 12 The Sidonians also,
> and the Amalekites, and the Maonites, oppressed you; and
> you cried to me, and I saved you out of their hand. 13 Yet you
> have forsaken me and served other gods. Therefore I will save
> you no more. 14 Go and cry to the gods which you have
> chosen. Let them save you in the time of your distress!"
>
> 15 The children of Israel said to Yahweh, "We have sinned!
> Do to us whatever seems good to you; only deliver us, please,
> today." 16 They put away the foreign gods from among them
> and served Yahweh; and his soul was grieved for the misery
> of Israel.

(God goes on to raise up a judge to save them.)

In the days of the Judges, God could get really frustrated with his people (perhaps he does now and we don't hear about it?). It sounds like he gave up on them -- that's what he said. The people repented anyway, and he grieved for them, and seemingly changed his mind. (The ESV uses the interesting "impatient for the misery of Israel".)

I use the term "seemingly" to signal that there is controversy about whether God should be seen as ever changing his mind, or be emotionally vulnerable to his creation. I think to defend a maximally strong, unchanging God, you would have to have theological assumptions drawn from outside this text (or it has been misleadingly translated by both the WEB and ESV.) The text most plainly shows God and Israel having emotions about each other, having something like a fight, and then making up. They are personally intertwined with each other, on an emotional level. They are both brought down (disestablishedness) to the level of where they are compelled by their own natures, because of the relationship. God is compelled to reject them by his own nature and also to restore them after they repent. The people are brought down to the level of facing death and rejection, and to the human needs of seeking survival and acceptance. At that level they repent. This all is a kind of intimacy, a political intimacy because it involves a group of people being close to God, being moved together to seek him.

For all that we could feel like the Israelites were wayward or spiritually backward, I am impressed by how they were able to feel, and feel together. How likely is it that all of America's Christians could repent at the same time, in the same spirit? Have we really repented of anything as a religion in a long time? Or do we just assume that sin is something private and quiet? Or do we downplay sin to the point that while it is certainly something we talk about (it's a mark of being a human, and saying that you are a sinner can be part of how you belong to a Christian community), it's not something we deeply believe in? (Or when we do call out sin in Christianity, it's always "those other Christians", and not "me personally"?)

(Are America's or the West's Christians one people in the first place, able to even consider collectively repenting? What about within denominations? Could the pope effectively call the Catholic Church to repent? Or are even they not one body?)

In their distress, they turned to God. Presumably, they had clear evidence that God was in the picture (he spoke to them). In our day, though we are Christians, do we feel like God is really in the picture? Do we think to turn to him, or are we practical atheists?

The Israelites were more communal, public, and emotional than we are, and so were able to experience something with God (and each other) that we do not, a particular dimension of loving God with their hearts.

I think that disestablishedness is what causes deep emotions, more so than establishedness. There is a kind of inner poverty which deepens emotions. When a whole nation is disestablished, its many members become more deeply emotional. This is a cost to an experiential diet which is too put-together, and that put-togetherness is what I would expect from a maximally firm and consistent government, by default. A maximally established government, by default, does not allow for disestablishedness in the people it establishes.

(It may also be the case that disestablishedness is what gives individuals the desire to be one people with each other. When a nation is wealthy it is held together by institutions or mechanisms, rather than by people being one people.)

I can't remember anything happening quite like this (Judges 10) in the Kings era (after Saul becomes king in 1 Samuel 10). I may have missed it, though. (On a future reading I should test the idea that just occurred to me, to see if "the people" exist in the Kings era as much as they do in the Judges era. I think they do in the Wilderness era under Moses. They aren't always the best characters, but they exist as part of the spiritual story. Whereas in the days of Saul, David, and Solomon, maybe not? Those kings get a lot of narrative, and they have relationships with God. Could it be as though the king relates to God instead of the people relating to God?)

(Side note: every year, the young women of Israel lamented for four days over Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11:40). Do we do anything analogous, as Western Christians?)

The Judges System Isn't Working (Judges 17 - 21)

Judges 17:

> 1 There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. 2 He said to his mother, "The eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and also spoke it in my ears -- behold, the silver is with me. I took it."
>
> His mother said, “May Yahweh bless my son!”
>
> 3 He restored the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, then his mother said, "I most certainly dedicate the silver to Yahweh from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a molten image. Now therefore I will restore it to you."
>
> 4 When he restored the money to his mother, his mother took

two hundred pieces of silver, and gave them to a silversmith, who made a carved image and a molten image out of it. It was in the house of Micah.

5 The man Micah had a house of gods, and he made an ephod, and teraphim, and consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest. 6 In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes.

From my notes:

17:1-6 Dedicating silver to the LORD by making idols out of it.

(Would a king have had a firmer, more consistent state religion which successfully preached and enforced orthodoxy? In principle, that sounds more likely than in a disestablished political system.)

Judges 19:

22 As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain wicked fellows, surrounded the house, beating at the door; and they spoke to the master of the house, the old man, saying, "Bring out the man who came into your house, that we can have sex with him!"

23 The man, the master of the house, went out to them, and said to them, "No, my brothers, please don't act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, don't do this folly. 24 Behold, here is my virgin daughter and his concubine. I will bring them out now. Humble them, and do with them what seems good to you; but to this man don't do any such folly."

25 But the men wouldn't listen to him; so the man grabbed his concubine, and brought her out to them; and they had sex with her, and abused her all night until the morning. When the day began to dawn, they let her go. 26 Then the woman came in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her lord was, until it was light. 27 Her lord rose up in the morning and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way; and behold, the woman his concubine had fallen down at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold.

> 28 He said to her, "Get up, and let's get going!" but no one answered. Then he took her up on the donkey; and the man rose up, and went to his place.
>
> 29 When he had come into his house, he took a knife and cut up his concubine, and divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the borders of Israel. 30 It was so, that all who saw it said, "Such a deed has not been done or seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt to this day! Consider it, take counsel, and speak."

Chapter 19 contains shocking, brutal evil, which leads to a civil war in 20 and 21, against Benjamin, the tribe in which the rape occurred. The people grieve over what they've done to Benjamin and try to get wives for them so their line doesn't die out. First they kill all the men in a town that didn't join them in going to war, and take their wives for Benjamin, and then they engage in human trafficking at a feast to Yahweh:

Judges 21

> 16 Then the elders of the congregation said, "How shall we provide wives for those who remain, since the women are destroyed out of Benjamin?" 17 They said, "There must be an inheritance for those who are escaped of Benjamin, that a tribe not be blotted out from Israel. 18 However, we may not give them wives of our daughters, for the children of Israel had sworn, saying, 'Cursed is he who gives a wife to Benjamin.'" 19 They said, "Behold, there is a feast of Yahweh from year to year in Shiloh, which is on the north of Bethel, on the east side of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and on the south of Lebonah." 20 They commanded the children of Benjamin, saying, "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, 21 and see, and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards, and each man catch his wife of the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. 22 It shall be, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we will say to them, 'Grant them graciously to us, because we didn't take for each man his wife in battle, neither did you give them to them; otherwise you would now be guilty.'"
>
> 23 The children of Benjamin did so, and took wives for themselves according to their number, of those who danced, whom they carried off. They went and returned to their

inheritance, built the cities, and lived in them. 24 The children of Israel departed from there at that time, every man to his tribe and to his family, and they each went out from there to his own inheritance. 25 In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did that which was right in his own eyes.

And that's the end of the book.

Clearly, the judges system has problems.

The People Choose to Have a Human King (1 Samuel 8)

1 Samuel 8:

> 1 When Samuel was old, he made his sons judges over Israel.
> 2 Now the name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah. They were judges in Beersheba. 3 His sons didn't walk in his ways, but turned away after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice.
>
> 4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together and came to Samuel to Ramah. 5 They said to him, "Behold, you are old, and your sons don't walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us."
>
> Samuel prayed to Yahweh. 7 Yahweh said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they tell you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me as the king over them. 8 According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, in that they have forsaken me and served other gods, so they also do to you. 9 Now therefore, listen to their voice. However, you shall protest solemnly to them, and shall show them the way of the king who will reign over them."
>
> 10 Samuel told all Yahweh's words to the people who asked him for a king. 11 He said, "This will be the way of the king who shall reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them as his servants, for his chariots and to be his horsemen; and they will run before his chariots. 12 He will appoint them to him for captains of thousands and captains of fifties; and he will assign some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest;

> and to make his instruments of war and the instruments of his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers, to be cooks, and to be bakers. 14 He will take your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, even your best, and give them to his servants. 15 He will take one tenth of your seed and of your vineyards, and give it to his officers and to his servants. 16 He will take your male servants, your female servants, your best young men, and your donkeys, and assign them to his own work. 17 He will take one tenth of your flocks; and you will be his servants. 18 You will cry out in that day because of your king whom you will have chosen for yourselves; and Yahweh will not answer you in that day."
>
> 19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; and they said, "No, but we will have a king over us, 20 that we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles."
>
> 21 Samuel heard all the words of the people, and he rehearsed them in the ears of Yahweh. 22 Yahweh said to Samuel, "Listen to their voice, and make them a king."
>
> Samuel said to the men of Israel, "Everyone go to your own city."

From my notes:

> 8:10-16 Samuel's warning against kings is that they take away people's freedom. Established governments become their own entity (vs. 15 - the officers get the money) which take people out of their normal lives.
>
> This sort of sounds like a libertarian's case against government.
>
> God may have been the following: concerned about that but more concerned with the people's desire to be like the nations (vs. 20, vs. 5).

When the people protested, they were being somewhat reasonable. They didn't want corrupt judges anymore. Maybe kings would be better? When I write that, I think, "no, why would kings necessarily be less corrupt than judges?" So maybe the people just wanted a king and were using the

corrupt judges as a pretext. Nevertheless, God's chosen path was imperfect even by his own standards, in that sin was a part of it.

Human civilization is us chasing some ideal of earthly perfection, or even (pragmatically) just iterating "being better" over and over, and in the process rejecting God, or not.

God's "Regret" (1 Samuel 15)

1 Samuel:

> 1 Samuel said to Saul, "Yahweh sent me to anoint you to be king over his people, over Israel. Now therefore listen to the voice of Yahweh's words. 2 Yahweh of Armies says, 'I remember what Amalek did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way when he came up out of Egypt. 3 Now go and strike Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and don't spare them; but kill both man and woman, infant and nursing baby, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"
>
> 4 Saul summoned the people, and counted them in Telaim, two hundred thousand footmen and ten thousand men of Judah. 5 Saul came to the city of Amalek, and set an ambush in the valley. 6 Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the children of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.
>
> 7 Saul struck the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is before Egypt. 8 He took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. 9 But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, of the cattle, of the fat calves, of the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to utterly destroy them; but everything that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly.
>
> 10 Then Yahweh's word came to Samuel, saying, 11 "It grieves me that I have set up Saul to be king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments." Samuel was angry; and he cried to Yahweh all night.
>
> 12 Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning; and

Samuel was told, saying, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, turned, passed on, and went down to Gilgal."

13 Samuel came to Saul; and Saul said to him, "You are blessed by Yahweh! I have performed the commandment of Yahweh."

14 Samuel said, "Then what does this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the cattle which I hear mean?"

15 Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the cattle, to sacrifice to Yahweh your God. We have utterly destroyed the rest."

16 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stay, and I will tell you what Yahweh said to me last night."

He said to him, "Say on."

17 Samuel said, "Though you were little in your own sight, weren't you made the head of the tribes of Israel? Yahweh anointed you king over Israel; 18 and Yahweh sent you on a journey, and said, 'Go, and utterly destroy the sinners the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' 19 Why then didn't you obey Yahweh's voice, but took the plunder, and did that which was evil in Yahweh's sight?"

20 Saul said to Samuel, "But I have obeyed Yahweh's voice, and have gone the way which Yahweh sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. 21 But the people took of the plunder, sheep and cattle, the best of the devoted things, to sacrifice to Yahweh your God in Gilgal."

22 Samuel said, "Has Yahweh as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying Yahweh's voice? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim. Because you have rejected Yahweh's word, he has also rejected you from being king."

24 Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned; for I have transgressed
the commandment of Yahweh and your words, because I
feared the people and obeyed their voice. 25 Now therefore,
please pardon my sin, and turn again with me, that I may
worship Yahweh."

26 Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you; for you
have rejected Yahweh's word, and Yahweh has rejected you
from being king over Israel." 27 As Samuel turned around to
go away, Saul grabbed the skirt of his robe, and it tore. 28
Samuel said to him, "Yahweh has torn the kingdom of Israel
from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours who
is better than you. 29 Also the Strength of Israel will not lie
nor repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent."

30 Then he said, "I have sinned; yet please honor me now
before the elders of my people and before Israel, and come
back with me, that I may worship Yahweh your God."

31 So Samuel went back with Saul; and Saul worshiped
Yahweh. 32 Then Samuel said, "Bring Agag the king of the
Amalekites here to me!"

Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, "Surely the bitterness
of death is past."

33 Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so
your mother will be childless among women!" Then Samuel
cut Agag in pieces before Yahweh in Gilgal.

34 Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his
house to Gibeah of Saul. 35 Samuel came no more to see Saul
until the day of his death, but Samuel mourned for Saul.
Yahweh grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel.

One time, about five years ago, I had a conversation with a young evangelical in a cafe about 1 Samuel 15. The ESV says that God "regretted" making Saul king. Samuel insists that God's not the kind of God to "regret" (that's the word used in vs. 29 instead of the WEB's "repent"). But God "regrets" nonetheless, the chapter later repeats (vs. 35). My interlocutor didn't like what he heard and came back maybe a week or two later having read some source on the Internet saying that God "relented", he didn't "regret". The stakes are, if God regrets, he changes his mind, and

thus was wrong at some point. God would then not know everything -- at least, not the future. He might have been justified in thinking that Saul was an acceptable choice as king back when he was anointed, but, as in vs. 11, because of what Saul did, what Saul chose to become by his own free will, this was no longer the case. God would have taken a risk on Saul, one which could turn out not as God desired. If that's so, there are probably an innumerable quantity of decisions like those of Saul (a number of them for each of us) that God can't foresee.

For my part, I didn't like hearing from him that "regret" meant "relent" anymore than he liked hearing the possibility that God could regret.

Why would the ESV use "regret"? Did they want to confuse people, knowing all the while that God can't really regret? Or were they saying what was most intellectually valid, trusting people to come to the right conclusion? Or is it really that there is some uncertainty in knowing what the Bible really says, and "regret" is possible, but "relent" is also possible? Or is it that "regret" is the best way to translate it and we only make theological assumptions that God must be above regret, which are not really supported by the Bible?

To this day, I'm not really sure. I guess I take the "there is some uncertainty in knowing what the Bible really says" option. I don't have a problem with thinking that God has regrets and doesn't know the future completely. But I am not completely sure that that is what the text says.

Why does it even matter? Why do we prefer to think of God one way or another? Neither my interlocutor nor I really knew all of what the Bible said. (So we could each bring up something that the other hadn't heard.) I think our preferences might have been along the "reality" / "perfection" split alluded to later. He wanted a God (and thus an image of the way things should be, perhaps, thus an image of how he was to live and how his church should be run, and so on) based in... something different than I did. He might have approved of winning and being right more than I would have. At the time, I was attracted to the thought that God regretted because it made sense with the view of God I was developing at the time. I saw God as someone who was continually being crucified -- our ordinary existences, often enough, are part of God's ongoing crucifixion. Such a God might well regret -- a God who is inherently vulnerable might as well be vulnerable to regret. I may have also had the Problem of Evil in mind. A God who had limitations of any sort would be more the kind to permit evil. Nowadays, I would rather believe that there is a God with a really good heart who exists, rather than one who is emotionally disconnected from the reality of those who suffer but who can guarantee victory; while I can suppose that my interlocutor might have rather believed that victory was assured, and didn't see a problem with God being emotionally disconnected.

Maybe this is one of those "metaphors for life". We can have victory if we are emotionally disconnected. "Victory" could also mean "physical survival". We suspect that if we really saw things the way they were, emotionally, we would lose some sort of competition, or die. We don't want to die -- we shouldn't die, right? I wonder how much of our thoughts about God are metaphors, where our real concerns are in our subconscious approaches to all kinds of non-God realities, like death, our lifestyles, and the values of our social groups. Maybe we have so much trouble with talking prosaically about those topics that they can only come out poetically, and get into our thoughts about God, or wholly create them.

Who are you more likely to rebel against, a God who is emotionally invincible (and has foreknowledge and omnipotence), or one who regrets (and thus lacks foreknowledge, and perhaps omnipotence)? Personally, I feel a greater loyalty toward the one who regrets. The one who regrets is real, but the one who is emotionally invincible, I would only feel like I should obey more if I do so out of fear -- not out of love. I don't have as much respect for a God who is emotionally invincible, although I may consider it imprudent to fight him. He's playing it safe.

Of course it could be the case that an emotionally involved God could happen to also have foreknowledge, and didn't really "regret" making Saul king, but simply "grieved" it, as in the WEB. He felt grief over what he did, although he knew all along what would happen and that it was the right thing to do.

As I type this out, I feel like while I still can't be completely sure that there is not some less-intuitive but valid way to read 1 Samuel 15, which supports something like "relent" instead of "grieved" or "regretted", I lean somewhat toward "regret" or "grieved" both because two literal translations (WEB and ESV), one widely respected by evangelicals (ESV), give "grieve" or "regret" as their main readings, and because Samuel insisted that God did not "repent" or "regret", when clearly God did by turning back from supporting Saul. Samuel's misstatement (wishful lie?) is poignant. He wants a reliable God as much as anyone would. But God turns back from the things that he says he'll do, and he grieves about some of the things that he's done.

In terms of this post, the conclusion I would draw is that: We can be uncertain about what the Bible says (it is effectively less-established to us than if we were certain); God may not have foreknowledge (less-established), or does things that he knows will hurt him and other people; God says he'll do one thing and then reveals that he will do another, based on how things have gone (God either lets us believe things that are not true about what his intentions are, or changes his plans) -- so, we will not get what we expected from him, thus the idea of his promises is less-established. All of these things can contribute to a reduction in our overall psychological establishedness.

I don't think that if God lacks perfect foreknowledge (the only limitation at stake here) that he is not competent enough to be trustworthy. Nor do I think the above gives people reason to disobey God. I believe God's authority comes from his willingness to undergo what we undergo. (I say "I believe" not as a politically rousing phrase, but rather to signal that this comes from my own perception of noetic reality, instead of from something I would try to prove based on commonly-shared principles.) What he recommends (if we know what that is) is the best course of action for us to take, because he knows better than anyone. Even if he lacks foreknowledge, he knows the present perfectly, and thus can predict better than any human, and also knows what he will do. What he couldn't predict, under the view that he lacks foreknowledge, is what people decide given their freedom, and thus how some things will play out between now and the end. But between you and God, if you are the way he wants you to be, things will turn out well, in the end.

Uzzah Tries to Save the Ark (2 Samuel 6)

2 Samuel 6

> 1 David again gathered together all the chosen men of Israel,
> thirty thousand. 2 David arose and went with all the people
> who were with him from Baale Judah, to bring up from there
> God's ark, which is called by the Name, even the name of
> Yahweh of Armies who sits above the cherubim. 3 They set
> God's ark on a new cart, and brought it out of Abinadab's
> house that was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of
> Abinadab, drove the new cart. 4 They brought it out of
> Abinadab's house which was in the hill, with God's ark; and
> Ahio went before the ark. 5 David and all the house of Israel
> played before Yahweh with all kinds of instruments made of
> cypress wood, with harps, with stringed instruments, with
> tambourines, with castanets, and with cymbals.
>
> 6 When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah
> reached for God's ark and took hold of it, for the cattle
> stumbled. 7 Yahweh's anger burned against Uzzah, and God
> struck him there for his error; and he died there by God's ark.

From my notes:

> 6:6-7 Uzzah tries to save the ark (protect God?) but disobeys God in the process. God is angry and kills Uzzah.
>
> Does this mean God cannot be benefited at all? Or that which makes up his well-being can't be benefited by human

initiative? Our well-being is part of his well-being. But God himself can't be killed by anything outside himself. He will be okay in the end, no matter how bad things get for him now. We have to respect him in who he is (part of making him holy) -- which is a kind of establishment over us. (That God is a certain way and the nature of God is the nature of establishedness.) We can rest in his establishedness and therefore respect him.

God lets us violate his holiness whenever we sin, but he made the ark a teaching point to teach his people to respect him (Is this ego-respect God wants, or survival-respect? I think the latter, or an analog to the latter given that survival is not literally a concern for God)

To respect something is to leave it as it is, whatever state of establishedness or disestablishedness it is. Being is an established thing, so all things that are are established in some way. To disrespect is to disestablish. To disrespect is good (or has a good outcome) when it opposes bad establishedness. (Or maybe disrespect is always bad, bad for the disrespecter? In that case maybe there's a respect for the highest someone can be and that they be the highest which can motivate disestablishing moves.

As long as bad establishedness exists, there is occasion for (some kind of) disestablishedness.

David's Census (2 Samuel 24)

2 Samuel 24

1 Again Yahweh's anger burned against Israel, and he moved David against them, saying, "Go, count Israel and Judah." 2 The king said to Joab the captain of the army, who was with him, "Now go back and forth through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan even to Beersheba, and count the people, that I may know the sum of the people."

3 Joab said to the king, "Now may Yahweh your God add to the people, however many they may be, one hundred times; and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. But why does my lord the king delight in this thing?"

4 Notwithstanding, the king's word prevailed against Joab and against the captains of the army. Joab and the captains of the army went out from the presence of the king to count the people of Israel. 5 They passed over the Jordan and encamped in Aroer, on the right side of the city that is in the middle of the valley of Gad, and to Jazer; 6 then they came to Gilead and to the land of Tahtim Hodshi; and they came to Dan Jaan and around to Sidon, 7 and came to the stronghold of Tyre, and to all the cities of the Hivites and of the Canaanites; and they went out to the south of Judah, at Beersheba. 8 So when they had gone back and forth through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. 9 Joab gave up the sum of the counting of the people to the king; and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men.

10 David's heart struck him after he had counted the people. David said to Yahweh, "I have sinned greatly in that which I have done. But now, Yahweh, put away, I beg you, the iniquity of your servant; for I have done very foolishly."

11 When David rose up in the morning, Yahweh's word came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, 12 "Go and speak to David, 'Yahweh says, "I offer you three things. Choose one of them, that I may do it to you."'"

13 So Gad came to David, and told him, saying, "Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now answer, and consider what answer I shall return to him who sent me."

14 David said to Gad, "I am in distress. Let us fall now into Yahweh's hand, for his mercies are great. Let me not fall into man's hand."

15 So Yahweh sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning even to the appointed time; and seventy thousand men died of the people from Dan even to Beersheba. 16 When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, Yahweh relented of the disaster, and said to the angel who

destroyed the people, "It is enough. Now withdraw your hand." Yahweh's angel was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

17 David spoke to Yahweh when he saw the angel who struck the people, and said, "Behold, I have sinned, and I have done perversely; but these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me, and against my father's house."

18 Gad came that day to David and said to him, "Go up, build an altar to Yahweh on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite."

19 David went up according to the saying of Gad, as Yahweh commanded. 20 Araunah looked out, and saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. Then Araunah went out and bowed himself before the king with his face to the ground. 21 Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?"

David said, "To buy your threshing floor, to build an altar to Yahweh, that the plague may be stopped from afflicting the people."

22 Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Behold, the cattle for the burnt offering, and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. 23 All this, O king, does Araunah give to the king." Araunah said to the king, "May Yahweh your God accept you."

24 The king said to Araunah, "No, but I will most certainly buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to Yahweh my God which cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. 25 David built an altar to Yahweh there, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So Yahweh was entreated for the land, and the plague was removed from Israel.

From my notes:

Ch. 24 This is a weird passage, esp. vs. 1. Vs. 1 is hard to make sense of since it sort of looks like God is the author of

sin. 1 Chronicles 21:1, a parallel text, says that Satan incites David. Maybe Satan used God to incite David, sort of like in Job? But then, in 2 Samuel 24:1, it says that God was angry, and incited. Could Satan make God angry at Israel? Point out some sin (as Accuser) that God would otherwise overlook? This seems to give Satan a lot of power over God. Is God less-established than in say, a classical-theism-leaning reading of the Bible? (Which might be the reading which is most in favor of establishedness and sees God as most established). (Could God be the author of sin? If that's so, how can we trust him? Less so than if he couldn't be, so he would be less-established.) Or is it the case that 2 Samuel 24:1 is wrong, and should be superseded by 1 Chronicles 21:1, which makes more sense theologically? In that case, the Bible itself is not perfectly established.

And yet we trust God, and/or the Bible, anyway, even though they may have some weakness or contradiction of what we might naively consider perfect establishedness.

(I suspect that there is at least one classical-theism-leaning / max-establishedness interpretation of 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1 which preserves or attempts to preserve a view that God and the Bible are perfectly established. It may be that I would grant them ~ 1 credence if I read them (or find it the case that if I added up all their credences it would come to ~ 1, crowding out the disestablishedness here), but if they were merely plausible, they wouldn't take away all my uncertainty about the establishedness of the Bible, which is itself a disestablishedness.)

I don't think that disestablishedness kills Biblical Christianity, because it's a special case of the Problem of Evil, and no matter how messed-up the world is, we still trust God anyway (if we are Christians), even if we can't explain how God could be both good and perfectly in-control given the worst of the evils we see. If (like me) we simply relax the expectation that God be perfectly in-control, then how can we trust reality? Well, for myself, I don't think about it, but I find that I mostly just do. The Bible only has to be significantly ("quantitatively") or specially ("qualitatively") trustworthy to be worth following.

(I don't think God lacks power, but I do think that he is unable to will evil, but that is needed for temptation, and temptation is needed for us to come to fully value him and his values. So someone else has to will the evil of temptation, and that "someone else" has bargaining power over God and can make the world be worse than what God would otherwise have it be. God's holiness is more fundamental to who he is than his power, and thus he can't be in perfect control.)

> We do trust disestablishedness, and, at least given this discussion (about 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1), in some sense disestablishedness is trustworthy, since the best path, even if imperfect, is the one we ought to trust.
>
> 2 Samuel 24:2-3 David orders a census -- this is something he's not supposed to do. Why would he order a census? Presumably to know his strength. To know how established you are establishes you. God would consider this bad if it meant David wasn't trusting him.
>
> 2 Samuel 24:10 David's conscience disestablishes him and he asks God to take away his sin (a kind of re-establishing).
>
> 2 Samuel 24:11-13 God offers David a way to pay for his sin.
>
> 2 Samuel 24:14 David trusts God's untrustworthiness more than man's untrustworthiness (Untrustworthy in the sense that, generally, a pestilence is something you should avoid, and which bad people are the kind of people to do to you.)
>
> 2 Samuel 24:25 David completes his repentance (presumably), and God responds.

Solomon's Impressiveness (Temple, Wealth, Wisdom) (1 Kings 5 - 10)

1 Kings 5

> 1 Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon, for he had heard that they had anointed him king in the place of his father, and Hiram had always loved David. 2 Solomon sent to Hiram, saying, 3 "You know that David my father could not build a house for the name of Yahweh his God because of the wars which were around him on every side, until Yahweh put his enemies under the soles of his feet. 4 But now Yahweh my

> God has given me rest on every side. There is no enemy and no evil occurrence. 5 Behold, I intend to build a house for the name of Yahweh my God, as Yahweh spoke to David my father, saying, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place shall build the house for my name.'

From my notes:

> 5:3 When the land is at rest (established), you can build a temple to God.
>
> Optimistically, good temple-building can serve as an anti-temptation to ameliorate the spiritual dangers of establishedness.
>
> Secular "temple-building" might be exemplified by the proliferation of art and games in our time, or especially as presented by transhumanists with regard to the far future (in *X-Risk*) or also what could be called "advanced experience", also in *X-Risk* but also in "Letter From Utopia".

1 Kings 5

> 13 King Solomon raised a levy out of all Israel; and the levy was thirty thousand men. 14 He sent them to Lebanon, ten thousand a month by courses: for a month they were in Lebanon, and two months at home; and Adoniram was over the men subject to forced labor. 15 Solomon had seventy thousand who bore burdens, and eighty thousand who were stone cutters in the mountains, 16 besides Solomon's chief officers who were over the work: three thousand three hundred who ruled over the people who labored in the work. 17 The king commanded, and they cut out large stones, costly stones, to lay the foundation of the house with worked stone. 18 Solomon's builders and Hiram's builders and the Gebalites cut them, and prepared the timber and the stones to build the house.

From my notes:

> 5:13 Solomon drafts forced labor out of Israel. (A good thing, to build the house of God? But God didn't even want a house, originally. Which would God rather have, for his people to be free, or for them to have more-established symbol of his

establishment over them? Or should the temple be seen as a way to honor God? Which would he prefer, to be honored, or for his people to be free? Perhaps God values being honored for the spiritual benefit being given those honoring?

An overall question: to what extent is Solomon a return to Egypt?

I'm not sure what to think of the temple -- it is somewhat ambiguous and mixed to me.

1 Kings 6

11 Yahweh's word came to Solomon, saying, 12 "Concerning this house which you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, and execute my ordinances, and keep all my commandments to walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. 13 I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel."

From my notes:

6:11-13 As Solomon builds the temple, God states that "concerning the temple" (Solomon's physical establishing), Solomon should also build a legal / loyal / obedient temple (a spiritual / psychological / fiducial establishing).

1 Kings 7

1 Solomon was building his own house thirteen years, and he finished all his house. 2 For he built the House of the Forest of Lebanon. Its length was one hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits, on four rows of cedar pillars, with cedar beams on the pillars. 3 It was covered with cedar above over the forty-five beams that were on the pillars, fifteen in a row. 4 There were beams in three rows, and window was facing window in three ranks. 5 All the doors and posts were made square with beams; and window was facing window in three ranks. 6 He made the hall of pillars. Its length was fifty cubits and its width thirty cubits, with a porch before them, and pillars and a threshold before them. 7 He made the porch of the throne where he was to judge, even the porch of judgment; and it was covered with cedar from

floor to floor. 8 His house where he was to dwell, the other court within the porch, was of the same construction. He made also a house for Pharaoh's daughter (whom Solomon had taken as wife), like this porch. 9 All these were of costly stones, even of stone cut according to measure, sawed with saws, inside and outside, even from the foundation to the coping, and so on the outside to the great court. 10 The foundation was of costly stones, even great stones, stones of ten cubits and stones of eight cubits. 11 Above were costly stones, even cut stone, according to measure, and cedar wood. 12 The great court around had three courses of cut stone with a course of cedar beams, like the inner court of Yahweh's house and the porch of the house.

From my notes:

7:1-12 Solomon builds a palace for himself, maybe using forced labor, certainly using a lot of resources. Perhaps this can be partially justified by his need to imporess the people in order to be their establishment?

(The tricky thing about unjust financial decisions is that they are often partially justified.)

1 Kings 8

1 Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel with all the heads of the tribes, the princes of the fathers' households of the children of Israel, to King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of Yahweh's covenant out of David's city, which is Zion. 2 All the men of Israel assembled themselves to King Solomon at the feast in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month. 3 All the elders of Israel came, and the priests picked up the ark. 4 They brought up Yahweh's ark, the Tent of Meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the Tent. The priests and the Levites brought these up. 5 King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who were assembled to him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing sheep and cattle that could not be counted or numbered for multitude. 6 The priests brought in the ark of Yahweh's covenant to its place, into the inner sanctuary of the house, to the most holy place, even under the cherubim's wings. 7 For the cherubim spread their wings out over the place of the ark, and the cherubim covered the ark and its poles above. 8 The poles were so long

that the ends of the poles were seen from the holy place before the inner sanctuary, but they were not seen outside. They are there to this day. 9 There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets which Moses put there at Horeb, when Yahweh made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. 10 It came to pass, when the priests had come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled Yahweh's house, 11 so that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud; for Yahweh's glory filled Yahweh's house.

From my notes:

8:1-11 Whatever God thought of the temple, he gave signs of blessing.

1 Kings 8

22 Solomon stood before Yahweh's altar in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven; 23 and he said, "Yahweh, the God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above, or on earth beneath; who keeps covenant and loving kindness with your servants who walk before you with all their heart; 24 who has kept with your servant David my father that which you promised him. Yes, you spoke with your mouth, and have fulfilled it with your hand, as it is today. 25 Now therefore, may Yahweh, the God of Israel, keep with your servant David my father that which you have promised him, saying, 'There shall not fail from you a man in my sight to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children take heed to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.'

26 "Now therefore, God of Israel, please let your word be verified, which you spoke to your servant David my father. 27 But will God in very deed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens can't contain you; how much less this house that I have built! 28 Yet have respect for the prayer of your servant and for his supplication, Yahweh my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which your servant prays before you today; 29 that your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there;' to listen to the prayer which your servant prays toward this place. 30 Listen to the

supplication of your servant, and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. Yes, hear in heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive.

31 "If a man sins against his neighbor, and an oath is laid on him to cause him to swear, and he comes and swears before your altar in this house, 32 then hear in heaven, and act, and judge your servants, condemning the wicked, to bring his way on his own head, and justifying the righteous, to give him according to his righteousness.

33 "When your people Israel are struck down before the enemy because they have sinned against you, if they turn again to you and confess your name, and pray and make supplication to you in this house, 34 then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land which you gave to their fathers.

35 "When the sky is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, if they pray toward this place and confess your name, and turn from their sin when you afflict them, 36 then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of your servants, and of your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk; and send rain on your land which you have given to your people for an inheritance.

37 "If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence, if there is blight, mildew, locust or caterpillar; if their enemy besieges them in the land of their cities, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, 38 whatever prayer and supplication is made by any man, or by all your people Israel, who shall each know the plague of his own heart, and spread out his hands toward this house, 39 then hear in heaven, your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to every man according to all his ways, whose heart you know (for you, even you only, know the hearts of all the children of men); 40 that they may fear you all the days that they live in the land which you gave to our fathers.

41 "Moreover, concerning the foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, when he comes out of a far country for your name's sake 42 (for they shall hear of your great name and of your mighty hand and of your outstretched arm), when he

comes and prays toward this house, 43 hear in heaven, your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you for; that all the peoples of the earth may know your name, to fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by your name.

44 "If your people go out to battle against their enemy, by whatever way you shall send them, and they pray to Yahweh toward the city which you have chosen, and toward the house which I have built for your name, 45 then hear in heaven their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause. 46 If they sin against you (for there is no man who doesn't sin), and you are angry with them and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; 47 yet if they repent in the land where they are carried captive, and turn again, and make supplication to you in the land of those who carried them captive, saying, 'We have sinned and have done perversely; we have dealt wickedly,' 48 if they return to you with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land which you gave to their fathers, the city which you have chosen and the house which I have built for your name, 49 then hear their prayer and their supplication in heaven, your dwelling place, and maintain their cause; 50 and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions in which they have transgressed against you; and give them compassion before those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them 51 (for they are your people and your inheritance, which you brought out of Egypt, from the middle of the iron furnace); 52 that your eyes may be open to the supplication of your servant and to the supplication of your people Israel, to listen to them whenever they cry to you. 53 For you separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be your inheritance, as you spoke by Moses your servant, when you brought our fathers out of Egypt, Lord Yahweh."

From my notes:

8:22-53 Religious activities that were previously unrelated to any temple are now related to the temple.

People wanted a place to worship (were going to "high places" (3:3)), so here was a way to give them a place of awe in a city.

Was "wild" religion (a military commander using Urim and Thummim in the field? Or simply inquiring of God? Or a farmer inquiring of God?) devalued by there now being a temple, an "official" place to be religious?

In Jesus' day, the Samaritans may have felt that their non-temple worship was devalued by the existence of the temple.

1 Kings 8

> 57 May Yahweh our God be with us as he was with our fathers. Let him not leave us or forsake us, 58 that he may incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances, which he commanded our fathers. 59 Let these my words, with which I have made supplication before Yahweh, be near to Yahweh our God day and night, that he may maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, as every day requires; 60 that all the peoples of the earth may know that Yahweh himself is God. There is no one else.
>
> 61 "Let your heart therefore be perfect with Yahweh our God, to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments, as it is today."

From my notes

> 8:58 Solomon prays for anti-temptation.
>
> 8:61 Solomon wants people's hearts to be fully true to God.

1 Kings 9

> 1 When Solomon had finished the building of Yahweh's house, the king's house, and all Solomon's desire which he was pleased to do, 2 Yahweh appeared to Solomon the second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. 3 Yahweh said to him, "I have heard your prayer and your supplication that you have made before me. I have made this house holy, which you have built, to put my name there forever; and my eyes and my heart shall be there perpetually. 4 As for you, if you

> will walk before me as David your father walked, in integrity of heart and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded you, and will keep my statutes and my ordinances, 5 then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, as I promised to David your father, saying, 'There shall not fail from you a man on the throne of Israel.' 6 But if you turn away from following me, you or your children, and not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, 7 then I will cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and I will cast this house, which I have made holy for my name, out of my sight; and Israel will be a proverb and a byword among all peoples. 8 Though this house is so high, yet everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss; and they will say, 'Why has Yahweh done this to this land and to this house?' 9 and they will answer, 'Because they abandoned Yahweh their God, who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and embraced other gods, and worshiped them, and served them. Therefore Yahweh has brought all this evil on them.'"

From my notes:

> 9:1-9 Being established by God is conditional on being true to him in a sustained way.

1 Kings 9

> 15 This is the reason of the forced labor which King Solomon conscripted: to build Yahweh's house, his own house, Millo, Jerusalem's wall, Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer.

From my notes:

> 9:15 Solomon did use forced labor to build his house.

1 Kings 10

> 1 When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning Yahweh's name, she came to test him with hard questions. 2 She came to Jerusalem with a very great caravan, with camels that bore spices, very much gold, and precious stones; and when she had come to Solomon, she talked with him about all that was in her heart. 3 Solomon answered all her questions. There wasn't anything hidden from the king

which he didn't tell her. 4 When the queen of Sheba had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, 5 the food of his table, the sitting of his servants, the attendance of his officials, their clothing, his cup bearers, and his ascent by which he went up to Yahweh's house, there was no more spirit in her. 6 She said to the king, "It was a true report that I heard in my own land of your acts and of your wisdom. 7 However, I didn't believe the words until I came and my eyes had seen it. Behold, not even half was told me! Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame which I heard. 8 Happy are your men, happy are these your servants who stand continually before you, who hear your wisdom. 9 Blessed is Yahweh your God, who delighted in you, to set you on the throne of Israel. Because Yahweh loved Israel forever, therefore he made you king, to do justice and righteousness." 10 She gave the king one hundred twenty talents of gold, and a very great quantity of spices, and precious stones. Never again was there such an abundance of spices as these which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

From my notes:

> 10:1 The queen of Sheba connects Solomon to the name (reputation?) of the LORD.
>
> 10:9 The queen of Sheba blesses the LORD, having been blown away (because of being blown away?) by how wise and wealthy he made Solomon.
>
> Humans are impressed by that kind of thing, and therefore it is a mechanism to cause them to find God trustworthy. Wealth is attractive, to whatever culture goes with it, whether that culture is ultimately trustworthy or not. (Westernness (as in the SSC post How The West Was Won) establishing itself globally).
>
> Are there other ways to draw people to God, particularly when they start out, far from any peculiarly Biblical values?

Solomon Falls Away (1 Kings 11)

1 Kings 11

> 1 Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, together

with the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites, 2 of the nations concerning which Yahweh said to the children of Israel, "You shall not go among them, neither shall they come among you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon joined to these in love. 3 He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines. His wives turned his heart away. 4 When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with Yahweh his God, as the heart of David his father was. 5 For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. 6 Solomon did that which was evil in Yahweh's sight, and didn't go fully after Yahweh, as David his father did. 7 Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, on the mountain that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech the abomination of the children of Ammon. 8 So he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. 9 Yahweh was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned away from Yahweh, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, 10 and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he didn't keep that which Yahweh commanded. 11 Therefore Yahweh said to Solomon, "Because this is done by you, and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant. 12 Nevertheless, I will not do it in your days, for David your father's sake; but I will tear it out of your son's hand. 13 However, I will not tear away all the kingdom; but I will give one tribe to your son, for David my servant's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake which I have chosen."

14 Yahweh raised up an adversary to Solomon: Hadad the Edomite. He was one of the king's offspring in Edom. 15 For when David was in Edom, and Joab the captain of the army had gone up to bury the slain, and had struck every male in Edom 16 (for Joab and all Israel remained there six months, until he had cut off every male in Edom), 17 Hadad fled, he and certain Edomites of his father's servants with him, to go into Egypt, when Hadad was still a little child. 18 They arose out of Midian and came to Paran; and they took men with them out of Paran, and they came to Egypt, to Pharaoh king of Egypt, who gave him a house, and appointed him food, and

gave him land. 19 Hadad found great favor in the sight of Pharaoh, so that he gave him as wife the sister of his own wife, the sister of Tahpenes the queen. 20 The sister of Tahpenes bore him Genubath his son, whom Tahpenes weaned in Pharaoh's house; and Genubath was in Pharaoh's house among the sons of Pharaoh. 21 When Hadad heard in Egypt that David slept with his fathers, and that Joab the captain of the army was dead, Hadad said to Pharaoh, "Let me depart, that I may go to my own country."

22 Then Pharaoh said to him, "But what have you lacked with me, that behold, you seek to go to your own country?"

He answered, "Nothing, however only let me depart."

23 God raised up an adversary to him, Rezon the son of Eliada, who had fled from his lord, Hadadezer king of Zobah. 24 He gathered men to himself, and became captain over a troop, when David killed them of Zobah. They went to Damascus and lived there, and reigned in Damascus. 25 He was an adversary to Israel all the days of Solomon, in addition to the mischief of Hadad. He abhorred Israel, and reigned over Syria.

26 Jeroboam the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite of Zeredah, a servant of Solomon, whose mother's name was Zeruah, a widow, also lifted up his hand against the king. 27 This was the reason why he lifted up his hand against the king: Solomon built Millo, and repaired the breach of his father David's city. 28 The man Jeroboam was a mighty man of valor; and Solomon saw the young man that he was industrious, and he put him in charge of all the labor of the house of Joseph. 29 At that time, when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him on the way. Now Ahijah had clad himself with a new garment; and the two of them were alone in the field. 30 Ahijah took the new garment that was on him, and tore it in twelve pieces. 31 He said to Jeroboam, "Take ten pieces; for Yahweh, the God of Israel, says, 'Behold, I will tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and will give ten tribes to you 32 (but he shall have one tribe, for my servant David's sake and for Jerusalem's sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel), 33 because they have forsaken me, and have

worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon. They have not walked in my ways, to do that which is right in my eyes, and to keep my statutes and my ordinances, as David his father did.

34 "'However, I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand, but I will make him prince all the days of his life for David my servant's sake whom I chose, who kept my commandments and my statutes, 35 but I will take the kingdom out of his son's hand and will give it to you, even ten tribes. 36 I will give one tribe to his son, that David my servant may have a lamp always before me in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen for myself to put my name there. 37 I will take you, and you shall reign according to all that your soul desires, and shall be king over Israel. 38 It shall be, if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do that which is right in my eyes, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, that I will be with you, and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel to you. 39 I will afflict the offspring of David for this, but not forever.'"

40 Therefore Solomon sought to kill Jeroboam, but Jeroboam arose and fled into Egypt, to Shishak king of Egypt, and was in Egypt until the death of Solomon.

41 Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, and all that he did, and his wisdom, aren't they written in the book of the acts of Solomon? 42 The time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was forty years. 43 Solomon slept with his fathers, and was buried in his father David's city; and Rehoboam his son reigned in his place.

From my notes:

1 Kings 11:1-8 What most directly turns Solomon away from God is his many foreign wives. Solomon somehow has time to have 700 wives and 300 concubines. He isn't the enemy of neighboring countries, but instead intermarries -- a peaceful, integrating thing to do. This creates a bad establishedness.

11:9-11 God is angry at Solomon for being spiritually unfaithful to him.

> God blessed Solomon richly, but still he turned away. The riches were not enough to secure his loyalty and actually (may have) hindered it (certainly the state of rest that the land could be connected with his many foreign wives).
>
> 11:14-41 So the cycle continues, to some extent, with a promised civil war.

Overall

God's values are not the same as ours, and he preferred the way things were under the Judges to the way they were under Solomon. People were unfaithful to him in both scenarios, but in the days of Judges they could be disestablished more regularly, led to call out to God more regularly.

We don't get to have perfect establishedness, not even from God. (Perhaps in heaven we do.) God and the Bible are of at least somewhat questionable trustworthiness. This does not mean that we should not trust them.

People (my cafe interlocutor and Samuel alike) want to see God as the kind of God who doesn't change his mind.

--

One question I found fairly simple to answer: whether God notably intervened more or less in the Judges era or in the Kings era. I think it's inconclusive. The Kings-era writings were more detailed, so they would catch more interventions. Judges was a more "30,000 ft in the air" perspective. It's clear that God intervenes in both eras.

Was God "hands-on", or "hands-off"? It depends on your perspective. You could argue (I would agree) that all of existence is connected to the consciousness of God. God is conscious of everything that actually exists in a moment, and it's by his conscious will (at least in a kind of "efficient cause" sense) that all things occur. But that's true of all kinds of earthly scenarios. People can get into very "godforsaken" situations in which in fact God is fully present in some metaphysical sense, but not in a "psychological" sense, from the perspective of what the "godforsaken" one can honestly see. Perhaps a theocracy (or a religiously-informed "firm and consistent" government?) is an attempt to get further from that possibility, while a libertarian government would allow people to get closer to that psychological state of "godforsakenness". Generally speaking, God does not seem to enforce a strictly godforsaken nor strictly "godimbued" (what I'll say is the opposite of "godforsaken") experiential diet for us, but we generally float somewhere between the two. Maybe the "slider" was more on psychological godforsakenness in the Judges days, and more on psychological godimbuedness in the Kings days? I know that in the Judges

days, it was possible for someone who was arguably an ordinary person at the time (Gideon when God first appeared to him) to be notably psychologically godforsaken, and that this was something the writer(s) of Judges thought worth pointing out, whereas in the Kings days, at the height of Israel's political establishedness, during the dedication of Solomon's temple, God appeared in a cloud in a vivid and obvious miracle in front of everyone.

I think overall in the Judges era God let people suffer more and trust more, while in the Kings era he established them more and blessed them more. Up until Solomon's reign, violence was more part of the story.

Spiritually, the high water mark of the era I read about was definitely David, who existed in the establishing-but-not-established phase of civilizational development. How many other people in his kingdom were influenced by his passion for God, I don't know. But if we see that kings can corrupt their nations, we might have at least a weak sense that good ones can "anti-corrupt" them. (Maybe there's more evidence that I'm already forgetting. I don't have a very retentive memory.)

Is the human kingship of Israel worth it just to get one good character into the Jewish cultural memory? Probably not, but it is a mitigating factor. (The spiritual consequences of all the kings that followed David probably outweighed the good of his memory.) David could have been an exemplary judge, who prophesied that one day, when the land was really ready, there would be a king.

Part 3: Subsequent Thoughts

Introduction

Here are some thoughts that I had about establishedness. I meant to write this up in a more organized way, but I am losing energy to work on this project, so I will mostly just leave these notes.

Notes

Philosophy

The truth and orthodoxy

The truth, and legitimacy, can be related to as "definitions", and as what they cash out to. We have a duty to the truth, whatever it is, and to legitimacy, whatever it is. We relate to them as unspecified things. But they also exist in a defined way. (They "cash out" to something specific.) Legitimacy cashes out to God, and in a sense, so does the truth. (God is the experiential / noetic path that is maximally non-misleading to follow.) Truth and legitimacy are to be loved and are good in themselves.

If "orthodoxy" is a synonym for "the truth" (whether God or his teachings, which are an extension of him), then of course it is good. But if it ends up being "the set of established beliefs", then it no longer is in touch with the truth (the truth makes us be open to what is not yet known to us). The set of established beliefs is not the full truth. To relate to the truth, we must have our eyes open. *We* must relate to it, as full-fledged persons. But "the set of established beliefs" says "focus on the things which do not require you to see for yourself, to think and care for yourself". If we emphasize orthodoxy enough, we shut out the part of ourselves that can genuinely assent to orthodox beliefs. We are no longer alive to truth, whatever it may turn out to be. It could so happen to be that someday we will have an exhaustive knowledge of reality insofar as it really matters for us to know. But even then, there is a difference between relating to that as truth, as something which easily could not be what it turns out to be but which is what it turns out to be, and relating to that body of truth as something taken as a matter of course. When we cease to see, because we are so sure we know what things look like, we do not really believe what we think we do. We don't fully trust those beliefs, because we take them as a matter of course.

Having the right beliefs in one sense gives us the right to take beliefs as a matter of course, but that is a dangerous temptation, because it can cause us to cease to really believe in them on more than a shallow level. We can perform our duties to the established truth which we no longer see for ourselves, but having deferred to others, we no longer see and no longer believe it (as a whole and in its separate propositions) for ourselves. So if we think faith saves us, orthodoxy is dangerous, much more dangerous than heresy. With heresy, you know something is wrong. You can see the controversy between orthodoxy and heresy, and see how heresy is flawed. If you are a heretic, you are persecuted and alive (if your heresy hasn't founded an orthodoxy of its own). But in an unbroken state of orthodoxy, people can fail to fully trust in the propositions they think they trust in. They can trust in Jesus, have the right propositions about Jesus, but lose interest in him on any more than a fairly superficial level. What is left is to retreat from really seeing the world, really seeing Jesus, and instead retreating to a kind of modest hedonism. What is left to be seen when everything fades into the background is your psychological well-being. Perhaps we can still love people somewhat in this state, but not as much as if aliveness to the truth enables us to really see the people around us. We see them as they are when God, the truth, shows how they can be seen with gusto.

If only the experts can handle the truth of the Bible, then only the experts will see the Bible as truth, and everyone else must defer to them, and then do not have the opportunity to see the Bible as truth, to really see it, for themselves. Which is better, to have all the right doctrines, to be able to justify them, but not be able to deeply believe them or follow them, or to

have some wrong doctrines, or risk that by not really being able to justify them, but be able deeply believe them and follow them? Uncertainty cuts against this deep belief, but so does complacent certitude. We learn (or our brains shut down as though we learn) to no longer trust our judgment, and this gives us certitude, and frees us from uncertainty. True belief, where we are both alive as knowers, open to truth-as-definition, and also to what the truth cashed out to, is something which is not a default position. Uncertainty and certitude are both powerful, natural states, but true belief has to sit in the middle, and is perhaps weaker.

The mindset of acquiring perfectly-justifiable propositions (or justifiable up to the best any humans can manage) is often (always?) at least somewhat aslant the mindset of actually believing those propositions, actually trusting them and living them out. If the purpose of the pursuit of knowledge is to acquire true beliefs, then justification and belief are somewhat in tension.

Establishedness is trust-producing

People trust in establishedness, even if on certain levels disestablishedness is more trustworthy, and establishedness can be untrustworthy.

Establishedness is more trust-producing than disestablishedness

Ambiguity and mixedness, definitions

Ambiguity and mixedness. "Mixedness": a thing is mixed if it in some sense should or could in itself produce ambivalent feelings in someone contemplating it. Ambiguity is when a thing should or could in itself produce a lack of knowledge or an uncertainty. A mixed thing can be understood, but it is complex to evaluate. There is an element of contradiction in mixedness, which can produce (perhaps should produce) feelings of horror, sadness (or something akin to sadness), or bewilderment ("bewilderment" being perhaps not identical to one of ambiguity's possible fruit, confusion -- maybe "bewilderment" is emotional, while confusion is mental?).

How to be a Christian given mixedness

Given ambiguity and mixedness, how should we prefer, act, and trust, as Christians? I want to explore this question at length, but don't have my conclusions now, and I want to finish this post sooner rather than later rather than wait for them so as to be able to report them here, where in a sense they are called for. I will say that my initial sense is that it is not obvious that we have to 1) be hedonists (only sure of our own feelings and thus only ultimately value them), 2) be naive humanists (because the fact that God *might* exist, if there's enough credence for it, even if it is some way away from certainty, is a powerful consideration in how we should act and trust), or 3) abandon all of the law of the Bible (or whatever could be thought of as law) in favor of reason (because the possibility that the

Bible *might* be the word of God such that it should shape our preferences, actions, and trustings, if high enough, could be a powerful consideration in how we proceed, as with belief in God). I don't think it impossible for people to come by reasonably firm preferences, courses of action, and trustings even given ambiguity and mixedness. However, the tonality of those preferences, courses of action, and trustings, will be different given ambiguous and mixed inputs, and most likely some or many of the specific preferences, courses of action, and trustings recommended by a worldview that tends toward acknowledging ambiguity and mixedness may differ from one which tends away from acknowledging them.

"Unlackingness": Perfection or Reality

Reading in Descartes (*Meditations*), I see the idea of a lackingness in reality which calls out for perfection. Perfection is the ultimate establishedness. The calling out could be a desire we feel in ourselves for reality to be other than it is, to be in some sense "mature and complete". (Perhaps I am somewhat in line with Levinas' "metaphysical desire" here, or perhaps I am not.)

I have found myself and reality to be lacking in something, but I didn't, and wouldn't, use the word "imperfect" to describe the lacking things, nor "perfect" to describe the good things. I think that you could say that "perfect" can be defined in different ways, and could have different flavors, but I would use a different word, "reality", for that which all beings aspire to, or ought to. I don't want to define "perfect" as "real, really so" given the connotations of "perfect". But maybe my "real" is a substitute for "perfect", and if not the same thing, has features in common with it.

There is a big difference between a person described as real, and one described as perfect. I have tried to define this difference over the years. I think many people will know what I'm talking about already, but spelling out exactly what this "reality" is has somewhat eluded me. I will attempt to give the definition I know of now.

Being real has something to do with bearing the burdens of reality. A real person speaks honestly about what is bad in reality, without trying to paint things as all being good. They are honest with other people about negative things, rather than fakely polite. A real person accepts the blame for things they have done, and takes on responsibilities. A real person might go to die on a cross, but a perfect person might come up with (perfectly correct) reasons why they didn't have to. (Maybe dying on a cross is a state of need, incompleteness, abjection, which are not in keeping with true unlackingness, on Perfection's account.)

So, which is more established, reality, or perfection? Is perfection real? Is reality perfect? This is a somewhat ambiguous way of putting things. To me, "reality" is a flavor or an image, which ironically does not have to exist (a world where everyone is "fake" is conceivable). (This "reality" has

something to do with "people who are in touch with the world as it actually is, in its ambiguity and mixedness". The "real" personality trait is one which is truth- and thus reality-oriented. Those are some of the elements that make up that flavor or image.)

Yet, I think that "reality" must exist, from a different angle, because "reality" (whether exactly defined as above, or in some better way) is what is the foundation of legitimacy. I believe (I say this not to be rousing or speech-giving, but rather to signal that I noetically perceive this, but may not at this time be able to prove it to one who doesn't see it) that things can be only if they ought to be -- what does not at all ought to be does not exist. "Ought", or legitimacy, is the basis of reality. But this ought is inherently one of burden-bearing, of going to the cross, and of a father's love. Only a person who was fully willing to bear our burdens and love us would deserve to declare absolute ought. So the foundation of reality has at least a note of connecting with the dark elements that can't be erased from the past, of putting oneself at risk, and of grief over those who are lost. There is no perfect win state for love (although hate can easily imagine a perfect win state for itself). If full being is maximal establishedness, then there is ambivalence mixed into maximal establishedness, and this is, in a sense, disestablishedness.

Which is more trustworthy, establishedness or disestablishedness? Naively, we might want to say that establishedness just is trustworthiness. But if being itself is Christ-like in its founding principle, when it is as it should be, then there is some disestablishedness in trustworthiness, and it seems from God's preference for the pre-human-kings model of government in Judges that there is something valuable in us valuing disestablishedness, in some ways. Disestablishedness brings us to ask, seek, and learn from God, and occasions intimacy with God. Which is more valuable, to be well-off, or to be close to God? Establishedness gives us (or just is) well-being, but disestablishedness gives us closeness to God. At least, that's our usual experience on earth.

How should we approach government on earth? Should it be something that produces maximal wealth, or maximal closeness to God? Both establishedness and disestablishedness are mixed things, and certainly disestablishedness does not always produce closeness with God. It's hard to come up with a formula, favoring one or the other. I think the editor of Judges may have had that view, of the mixedness of both the judge and human king models of government. From a deeply theistic point of view, it may be hard to say what to do. What really favors God's interests?

I feel as though there is a way for Christians to really favor God's interests. Pursuits like evangelism and apologetics (at their best), I think do move the world in God's direction. I suspect that with care, one could figure out how the adjacent pursuits (art, culture, politics, government, economic system, etc.) tend to favor or disfavor people coming to love God. Perhaps

one could come up with a list of secular values which are preparatory for loving God. (Maybe some of the traditional virtues work. I would suggest fiduciality as a less-traditional orientation, to balance out hedonism.) Then, in art, politics, and even government, these could be worked into what is given to secular people as their culture, without directly establishing Christianity as the religion of a secular nation. For whatever reason, it appears that Jesus did not want his kingdom to be established with force, and governments seem to have to use force, as far as we've seen. This disestablishedness is in keeping with the disestablishedness of the Father, who (perhaps) aches to have to send his rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. Some element of valuing disestablishedness, and the disestablishedness of God's people, and even of God, should be part of whatever pursuing we do of God's interests, including that of shaping culture.

Mixedness does not prevent altruism

Talk of mixedness may make it seem like there's no point to altruism of any sort. But I think there is something which is an unambiguous good (people entering God's rest) and something which is an unambiguous bad (people not entering God's rest). The proper aim of theistic altruism (including Christian altruism) is for people to enter God's rest. Obtaining other goods beside salvation may be instrumental in bringing about salvation, but in themselves they are mixed. And we have only partial knowledge of whether we have succeeded in contributing to someone else's salvation. It isn't as simple as seeing them make a profession of faith. (That's a good sign but not the end of the story.) So it's hard for us to really be able to say "this is the 100% right thing to do" or "we have 100% succeeded in our aims by doing this thing". The belief that we have won (or even that God has unambiguously won) through any given thing that we may do or already have done is not something we can hold with certainty, but only with probability. That said, there are courses of action which are better than others, and, though we may not be able to be sure we've 100% found them, we should seek to find them.

Some things ought to be permanently

Everything that exists ought to be, but some things ought to be permanently (are legitimate), while others only ought to be temporarily (are illegitimate). Both establishedness and disestablishedness exist and therefore both ought to be. (They each are established on the level of "oughting to be".) Some establishedness ought not to be permanently, similarly with some disestablishedness. Trust requires a disestablishedness which ought to be permanently, so that we can trust God forever.

The mixedness of bringing to justice

Justice could be defined as "the state of things being established". Maybe established in certain ways, or in certain dimensions.

There is something legitimate about bringing the world to legitimacy. However, the process itself can be mixed. We are told to leave vengeance to God. We imagine that vengeance, for God, feels like it does for us. There is something sweetly establishing about the vengeance that brings justice (or, vengeance which we believe brings justice). But would God take pleasure in the death of the wicked? The wicked deserve to die, but he does not have to take satisfaction in that the way we might want to (we who have experienced the wicked person firsthand, the fresh bitterness of them).

Although bringing the world to justice makes it most legitimate, and legitimateness is the best, there is still loss along the way, and even justice and legitimateness call for some degree of ambivalence.

God's trustworthiness despite his disestablishedness or less-established approach to relating to us

Establishedness (or establishment) on the deepest level permits disestablishedness on all the others.

God's disestablishedness (Problem of Evil, any way that God is tragically hands-off) can't dominate the fact of his ultimate trustworthiness. Why? If his (relative) untrustworthiness follows from his (ultimate) trustworthiness (such as in MSLN theodicy), then no matter how bad evil is, no matter how much it rules the world, and no matter how tragic the loss it inflicts; overall, generally speaking, God wins in the end -- but, with mourning and perhaps with something like a limp.

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Even though all(*) will be well in the end, there is brokenness in the here-and-now, and the here-and-now is no less real than the far future of God's rest ("Jesus wept").

Trust vs. physical survival

Physical survival requires establishedness, but trust requires disestablishedness.

Disestablishedness is established

There is an establishedness to disestablishedness (it exists).

Being is personal and therefore partially disestablished

Being is both established and disestablished, because persons are both established and disestablished. Everything reduces to personal being (impersonal beings only exist insofar as they are perceived by personal beings -- Berkeley's "*esse* is *percipi*" or in my jargon, they are "parts of persons' experience bodies).

Trust

Trust as having a question, as saying "yes".

Psychological, Social, Spiritual

Belonging to a group may inhibit intimacy with God

(Sidebar: Belonging to a group gives a sense of stability, but tempts you to no longer seek God. Does a group experience intimacy with God? When you belong to a group, the group usually influences you more than you influence the group.)

If we don't value poverty sufficiently, we lose the ability to benefit from it

Crying out to God requires that we be in poverty and no longer want to be in poverty. Crying out to God is what bonds us to God deeply. What is most valuable about poverty is the aspect of poverty where we don't value it, where we have to undergo something we genuinely don't want to undergo. We may, or may not, connect that true poverty with God. If we don't, then the poverty has not had its real value, and may have little value at all (if the only good (or the main good) that exists is wealth and love, and there is no love, then the only field of value is wealth, and poverty is an unambiguous bad).

Seeing by fighting

Do we find God by surrendering, or by fighting? Surrender adheres to establishedness, while fighting questions establishedness and therefore actually sees things. If we take the route of fighting, will we turn away from God (as though, for instance, by pursuing reason and morality to their limits, we will be drawn away from God)? Is surrender really a virtue? If we are supposed to love God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths, I would think that means that we should seek to fight (to be active, alive, engaged, seeing for ourselves, seeing that God is good for ourselves) in order to devote all of our hearts and minds to God.

Mixedness of upbringing

Establishedness has a future, and a past. Past establishment is in heritage, upbringing, ethnic identity, similarly.

How mixed upbringing is (both fortunate and unfortunate). It gives you a place in life, a sense of who you are and where you are going, a concept of right and wrong, and a way to form ties of kinship with other people. But because people's upbringings differ, there is often an automatic enmity people have with those who have other upbringings. If your upbringing doesn't happen to have really been in line with the truth, it can tempt you to not believe the truth.

Relying on others to shield ourselves from reality

I wonder to what extent, consciously or not, we rely on being part of a

people group, having a leader, being part of a community or a church, being in a romantic relationship or having certain kinds of friendships, in order to allow ourselves to put to sleep a part of ourselves, the part that is fully conscious of psychological disestablishment, and which makes decisions with a full facing of reality.

Fans seek establishedness

A work of art can be a psychological establishment, to take it in or just to know that it exists. Similarly, an artist. To be a fan is to lean on someone to speak for you through their art.

Danger of bad establishedness

I fear that to settle on a bad (but probably apparently good) establishedness is one of the most likely ways to forfeit heaven. Disestablishedness doesn't let you love the way things are too much. If you love the way things are enough, why love God? Why be interested in God? Why be interested in what God is actually saying?

Kinglessness, spouselessness

Perhaps not having a human king is like not having a spouse. You (a body of people) relate to God alone. Perhaps with the issue of kinglessness there is something analogous to Paul's idea that those who have wives seek to please them, but those who do not primarily seek to please God.

Good and bad establishedness

There is a kind of discontent (disestablishedness) which is a sickness of spirit, which leads to despair and a godless fiducial life, while there is a spiritual hunger (disestablishedness) which is full of life, which leads to love and trust of God.

Rejecting establishedness as protest

Some people, perhaps, reject the obvious advantages of establishedness because those who are established don't understand the less-obvious value of disestablishedness. I think real goodness and badness are largely orthogonal to that divide. An established person does need to trust disestablishedness -- but not necessarily the disestablishedness that a given valuer of disestablishedness prefers.

Political fights

Political fights: not even God gets his way, so why should you insist that you do?

Kings obey laws

David (for instance, when he refuses to kill Saul) obeys some kind of law. The king can't rely on a king to decide for him, so he must listen to the law himself. The king inquires of God for the people, is more naked before disestablishedness. So perhaps we should be kings/queens ourselves, and

be like David?

Becoming yourself is a natural but dangerous move

Becoming yourself -- going from disorganized, undifferentiated, unselfconfident, chaotic, undefined, unopinionated, or other species of disestablishedness, to their opposites, species of establishedness. Perhaps maturity (the thing for which we have "metaphysical desire"?) is a seemingly-inevitable outcome of life, a gravity well we can't escape. How frightful to fall down the wrong well, or to get stuck in a bad maturity. We are at risk when we fail to seek the best, and fail to let the best judge the set of established values that tell us if we are okay, or not (in need of reaching out for what we realize we don't have, or not).

Valuing the firmness of true establishedness

We value the firmness of true establishedness (establishedness as definition) instead of what true establishedness is (what satisfies the definition), which is love. Pure love, apart from wealth, is the cross, and mourning (and maybe something else?)

Law and king prevent petty kingships

When there is no law (or education), an established culture, then individuals rule over each other. If there is one king, he can prevent many kings, by his authority. (But I think better for everyone to share the same law and education (that is, a really good one), so that no one needs to be ruled over by another person's force of personality.)

Disestablishedness in growing up

I've been acquainted with people who were raised Christian, but then sometime in their childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood, something bad happened (or there was a pattern of bad things happening), and as a result, they turned against Christianity. Some kind of disestablishedness was involved in their stories of becoming ex-Christians. I don't know if they "had to" reject Christianity as a result of what happened to them, or whether it would be maximally fair to Christianity to blame what traumatized them on Christianity itself, but I do know that they were all generally untrusting people, perhaps as a result of what happened, and that inability or disinclination to trust is something that would naturally follow from disestablishedness, likely enough in a way that people might not trust God, and find Jesus (the name of, and whatever connects to the name) to be aversive, untrustworthy, etc.

Childhood can be a sheltered time. Then we "throw children to the wolves" during their teens, twenties, and beyond. Then, after having confronted the "wolves", children (now more adult), try to (or get to) have a time of relative rest, learning, and healing. The Millennium has its type in that phase of life.

I think that despite the value of disestablishedness, there can be better and worse disestablishedness, and given a certain pattern of disestablishedness in a person's life, better and worse ways to enable young people to learn the important lessons that disestablishedness is good at teaching. (One example: do our children know that crying out to God is a thing to do in hard times?)

Not all cultures seem to throw their children to the wolves as much as ours does. I've suspected that the teens and twenties are a long, drawn-out initiation rite. You learn the nature of reality (that no one will hold your hand, that people won't support you, that you can't accomplish great things). You are given freedom, but then no human authority limits you, rather wild chance limits you. This is good in a liberal society where we're not allowed to say out loud what right or wrong really are since there is no socially shared moral realism (maybe to the extent that we no longer say to ourselves in our own minds what right or wrong really are). You don't decide that the status quo is good, you simply lose the spirit or fight that would have caused you to oppose it, and thus the social order is preserved.

In other cultures, we would have a kind of communicable order (if we were Aborigines, the Law of the Dreamtime, for instance), and the community would intentionally initiate young people, and provide a harrowing initiation rite. But now the harrowing initiation rite is just life itself, and there is no human intentionality behind it, no intellectual order to hold to consciously.

If we had the nerve to initiate our young people like some traditional cultures do, we might not need disestablishedness as much. And even if we lean on disestablishedness to teach young people, we may be able to do so more effectively and with less gratuitous suffering (and alienation from God, a response like Gideon's when God first came to him) if we are conscious of all this and find some suitable way to be active and intentional in the lives of young people as they develop.

Relying on other than God

Which is worse, to rely on yourself rather than on God, or to rely, not on yourself, but on a collective, rather than on God? (This may be a trick question.)

David, more fortunate

David had a harder life than Solomon, but was more fortunate spiritually.

God is king means... ?

"God is king" can be spoken to say "God is worthy to be king" or to say "God is in perfect control".

Going from disestablished to established is spiritually fortunate

Disestablishedness is bad (Gideon not seeing God), and people don't like it. Too much establishedness is bad. (The worst of Solomon.) But coming to be established (David), is good?

If we cry out to God and he answers, we need to have disestablishedness to begin with and then we end up with more establishedness. This sounds like an analogue to economic growth (political-spiritual growth?). So when the "cry out and be answered" mechanism / practice / pattern is working, it converts disestablishedness into establishedness. This involves trusting God as part of the process, and maybe a lasting loyalty to or closeness with God is a lasting result.

Political

Political disestablishedness must be worked for

Anarchist anarchy (the anarchy that anarchists desire and which can sound like a good thing) may take work to maintain. Hierarchy is a natural tendency in groups of humans above a certain size, so it may be only with vigilance that hierarchy can be suppressed.

Similarly the trend toward establishedness is a natural part of human psychology, and if there is any danger inherent in establishedness, such that we need to bring about some disestablishedness, or genuinely value disestablishedness, it (establishedness) probably has to be resisted consciously and deliberately.

Is this Christian anarchism?

I don't identify with labels (even if they may in some sense accurately describe me), and I am hesitant to label myself, but it does seem like I should ask myself if by writing this post, I am asserting that I am a Christian anarchist.

Perhaps if that term is taken broadly enough, it could contain the ambivalence about establishment in this post (rather than being unambivalently against power). Anarchism could be an attempt to bring about a utopia, and I have a utopian side, but I think that utopias are inherently mixed. Anarchism could be a rousing call to war against establishments, and I would like to not make rousing calls or tear down people's houses. Anarchism might love establishedness more than God in its own way. Perhaps (it might love) the establishedness of being in the right theologically (assuming that the Sermon on the Mount trumps the parts of the Bible that allow for us (perhaps in our weakness and hardness of heart) to institute state violence).

International establishments

Is the Northern Triangle being punished for its own sins by being disestablished? Maybe in some sense, their actions are causing their situation. (Some individuals in the area causing it more than others.) But

they are sort of like client states of the United States. The consequences of American sins rippling out to the nations within the sphere of the US's influence. (American demand for cocaine, American leaders dumping gang members in El Salvador at a bad time in El Salvador's history.)

The world is becoming one established thing. The larger the electrical grid, the bigger the failures (according to this paper). Establishedness brings disparate elements into one, letting them sicken each other, and suppresses failure so that they end up worse. (Israel and Judah were not in captivity for a long time, under the kings, while it was a cyclical occurrence under the judges -- until they were each taken into captivities that have lasted to this day (not all the Israelites have come out of the nations)).

Granted, a minarchist or localist dissent to globalism can still be established in a way that affects how people relate to God. Maybe a healthy localism is the greater threat to loving God, unless it guards against forgetting God, because it really can speak to human needs convincingly. (It's higher on the Hierarchy of Betrayal than what currently rules the world.)

The spiritual danger of kings can also be found in localism, globalist liberalism, or libertarianism. Whatever house you like to sleep in can tempt you by its comfort to never sleep outside (so you don't sleep under the stars).

Politics emphasizing relationship with God

It's premature for me to have a worked-out opinion on what I would say the relationship of Christianity and politics ought to be, but I would say that whatever approach Christians take should emphasize people's relationships with God, instead of people's conformity with Christianity-derived laws or even ethical preferences. Ethical attitudes, even ones derived from Christianity, can't replace a person's relationship with God, and a person in a saving relationship with God can be wrong about their ethical attitudes with less of a cost to them than a Christian-themed person who does not love God.

Collective identity of Jews in Captivity as trustworthy for political establishedness

Political establishedness is based in some kind of collective identity. I find that naturally I tend to lack identities (that is my "is"). But if I think about what kind of collective identity I should choose (out of a kind of "ought-believing", perhaps), I find that it ought to be the Jews in the Captivity, especially those who wrote down the Old Testament, looking back at their history, what went wrong; regretful, dispossessed, in the desert. Power tempered with sorrow, no sense of pure winning. Few people (if any) can win anymore (can legitimately consider getting what they want to be a pure victory for the good) given the history that goes into where we are

today. Everything is sullied, though we try to forget that and be pragmatic, concerned less for the truth in itself than for how we can get our interests served, how we can get the most winning out of whatever we have. But the Jews in Captivity (at least, some of them) knew that they couldn't win anymore. If you can't win, all you have left is the truth.

I think a collective identity like that of (some of? most of?) the Jews in Captivity can found trustworthy power, more so than most others. It doesn't come naturally to us (even if we were in captivity, it might not). But it would come more naturally to us if we shared that identity with each other.

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It might sound like there is no unsulliedness, but that is not true. Holiness is possible, and God has always been holy. It's just that his holiness does not prevent him from his life story getting mixed up with sordid events, or even from him using resources that were partly "paid for with dirty money". What is unsullied about God is his love.

The Northern Triangle may be worse than Judges-era Israel

In Part 1 I said:

> One could argue that God is not as much king in the Northern Triangle as he was in the time of Judges, and that would give an easy way to decide.

I think the Northern Triangle may be significantly worse (more horrific) than in Israel in the days of the Judges. (Maybe this indicates that God is less king there psychologically, if not metaphysically or by rights.) The worst thing that is recorded in Judges scandalizes the whole nation and is unprecedentedly bad (Judges 19:30), but in the Northern Triangle, it sounds like incidents of that level of brutality and depravity are not necessarily literally common, but common enough to be "a thing that happens", and do not seem to provoke national outrage on the scale of Judges-era Israel. One could argue that disestablishedness at the level of the Northern Triangle produces enough gratuitous evil (not even beneficial instrumentally in turning people to God or in any other way) that it's worth reforming to make it more established. The captivities that the Israelites experienced in the days of Judges might not have been as bad as the situation in the Northern Triangle. On the other hand, it may be that as bad as the Northern Triangle can be, it's still spiritually productive, and if we were successful in fixing it from a worldly point of view, we wouldn't stop at leaving it at a Judges-level of disestablishedness, but would establish it like the US, which could be spiritually worse. I suppose this is an empirical question, if we knew how to measure these things.

Ideally, there would be some way to keep the best of both the Northern

Triangle (or Judges-era Israel) and the United States. A wise person once told me "awareness comes through pain", but in theory there might be a high level of genuine awareness that can be attained with more, or less, pain. Maybe some confusion or deception comes through pain as well as awareness.

Personal

Personal scale kings

Maybe, in a sense, God wanted the people in the days of Judges to be their own kings, to be established in themselves at a local or even individual level, something that a king would take away from them. A libertarian's desire for personal establishedness might have some parallel with this.

I think of my experiences with people who have played the role of "king" in my own life, someone from whom I sought establishment over me, and they tended to be some of the worst relationships that I have known. A "king" like Solomon, a "king" like David, and a "king" like Saul. I have had to learn to not seek "kings" and instead be established in myself, and therefore take the risk of disestablishedness, and the experience of disestablishedness, more on my own. Perhaps this is something God wanted for the people in the days of Judges, that at more levels of society, people would be established for themselves, would only depend on God.

To be your own king is oddly enough to be more disestablished than to rely on a king to be establishment for you. It is also to become more established in yourself. If that establishedness is rooted in your relationship with God, then we get a "Judges-like" personal establishedness. But if that establishedness is disconnected from God, we get a "libertarian-like" personal establishedness (taking libertarians as strawmen who just want to do their own thing). A Christian libertarian has two paths open to him or her.

Fighting Evil

Thinking back on past books, I remember one entitled *How Can We Love?*. That book was an intense book, which was a reaction, in part, to someone who was too worn down. If you are ambivalent enough, do you stop seeing evil, and thus fighting evil? In *How Can We Love?*, I called out one sin in particular, economic sin, not using your own resources in a way that connected with the poverty of whoever is poor. The book recommended forgiveness, but the energy of it was insistent and I wonder how many readers could grasp that it favored forgiveness, underneath the impatience and simplicity of it. I suppose the book may be saying "Go do work" -- ideally that is what it would communicate. In that sense it may be compatible with a view that things are mixed -- maybe it's clear enough that the best course of action is to go do work, even if things are mixed.

I also wonder how much that book really favors loving God. It contains

some explicitly theistic material. But I suspect that a reader who wasn't careful would forget that God exists, and think that humans were supposed to be moral, were supposed to rise up and fight evil, that we should all take on the role of God. The book was written with a strong, authoritative voice, which could lead someone who was looking for a human to be their god to find that in me, or in the person they might think I was given the book I wrote back then. I wonder to what extent morality is something that we are into so that we can be God, so that we can work righteousness. (There is both a positive version of that "being God" (being like God, kin to God) and a negative version (trying to be a god, but a stranger to God).)

I do think fighting evil is important, but the real evil is subtle. In my own experiences with evil, I see how much it is based in deception. The mindset that boldly goes out to do work may not be the one to understand what the truth is.

Some people are like prophets, and some like kings. Prophets say the truth without any sense of responsibility. They don't have to live up to their messages. The truth has to be said by someone, even an unworthy person. It has to be said with full bluntness, and cause whatever casualties it causes. But kings have maximal human responsibility. They are the caretakers of groups of people. The subtlety is that the king (ideally) listens to prophets, and implements what they say. But the king does so with responsibility and an eye to all the costs, and thus sees the mixedness of what he does. The prophet has the freedom to see things as black and white, but the king either sees shades of grey (ambiguity) or black inextricably intertwined with white (mixedness).

Jesus was both prophet and king, although on earth he kept his kingship more or less contained. Perhaps a rare few people can balance being both prophet and king. Usually the prophet must be powerless, and the king must listen to the prophet, for things to work properly. But in a democracy, who is really powerless? There's more of a continuity between a prophet and a king. You could start out as a prophet and then without realizing it start to have a (micro-)king's power, and the need for a king's responsibility to all those in his kingdom.

Davids think they are surrounded by Goliaths, but they are Goliaths themselves, to somebody or the other. A classic way for evil to enter a situation is to think you have all the freedoms of smallness, when in fact you have become large yourself.

What is real evil? Christians involved in politics should think about how spiritual warfare works. Our battle is with unseen beings, not with people.

I think my old book (*How Can We Love?*), written by a younger person than I am now, is a valuable thing for an old and worn-down person to read, if they don't lose the wisdom of sorrow. Part of good establishedness

is to have both energy and moral clarity (youth?) along with the discernment and compassion (age?). It may be hard to balance both young and old energies in oneself at the same time, but if that is impossible, at least drifting back and forth between them can be good. (Side question: when Jesus was on earth, during the time of his ministry, was he young, or old?)

Mourning

Even if God does not mourn the death of a purely evil person when they have hardened themselves, the hardening itself and the decisions leading up to it are a tragic thing. Truly moral monsters chose to be that way, and were originally children.

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The mourning in heaven does not dominate all other feelings. To be truthful, one must acknowledge both the good and the bad.

Monasticism

Worry when temptations cease

(Sidebar: Establishedness. One of the Desert Fathers said something like "You should worry when the temptations cease." The danger of the Promised Land. God wants you to be there, but it's still spiritually dangerous.)

Monasticism as institutionalized disestablishedness

Lack of resolution as disestablishedness. The way of the desert: you want something but you can't have it. Resolution: have it or stop wanting it. God can work in your life through the lack of resolution.

Monasticism as institutionalized disestablishedness. A loose institution? (A movement?) Or a built-up institution? (A monastic order?) If built-up enough, there is less disestablishedness, more establishedness. The establishedness of a set of rules for monks. Monastic orders as kings?

Celibacy as establishedness in the desert

Celibacy is a kind of establishedness in the desert (the desert is what is established in the celibate person). The human mind tends to want to find rest in people rather than in God alone. Biologically, people tend to have an urge to find a mate. With a mate, a person can found a family (and nations come from families). Therefore celibacy is often a lifestyle of disestablishedness. It has its own establishedness (it is a lifestyle), but it causes its adherents to sometimes be alien to their own nature. (That's been my experience as a celibate person, more or less.)

The ability to choose disestablishedness, whether through celibacy or some other strategy, is a useful thing if you want to make sure that you remain

close to God through something like the Judges pattern (through the cycle of disestablishment leading to inquiry of God and calling out to God for help, or other seeking of God, followed by his answer, a basic pattern of spiritual intimacy). An interesting challenge for a Christian political thinker could be to think of ways that the body politic could choose disestablishedness, such that the body had higher rates of spiritual intimacy. In the days of Judges, it seems as though God imposed disestablishedness on the Israelites by selling them into "mini-Captivities", but perhaps there are other, less brutal ways for a nation to be close to God, available to willing peoples. (Maybe it would also make sense to think of corporate churches (i.e., "100 people with a pastor and a building"), or other associations of Christians, as "Christian micro-nations" and apply Christian political thinking to them, including the idea of deliberately seeking certain kinds of disestablishedness.)

Asceticism could be a disestablishedness that causes you to love and trust God

Asceticism (a form of choosing disestablishedness) may be somewhat valuable as a means to be free of the slavery of having to give yourself what you crave, or as a means to a simple life more free from economic slavery, and perhaps for other reasons, but it is most valuable if it actually causes you to love and trust God more.

Monastic disestablishedness of watchfulness

One response to the reign of establishedness is the monastic response. (Especially the least-established monasticisms.) The early Christian monks lived the way of the desert. In the spiritual desert, there is little food or water, and wild and evil spirits roam around, looking for a desert mind to tempt. This provides a disestablishedness which gives the desert-dweller increased opportunities to cry out to God.

I've emphasized crying out to God, since it is in Judges, but there may be other patterns by which people draw close to God due to disestablishedness. Disestablishedness causes people to have to be watchful, to avoid spiritual danger. Avoiding spiritual danger is a motion of choosing God's values, and is a way for the will, intellect, and intuition (and possibly the emotions and body) to love God.

Current Events

A truly Christian nation would be less established

(Sidebar: Is there a way to de-escalate without risking your opponent taking over you? If the US hadn't responded after 9/11, what would have happened? By not intervening in the Middle East / Afghanistan, would they have undermined support for those who wanted to attack America, by giving them less legitimate cause for grievance?

Our nation is taken to be a representative of Christianity by some Muslims, but it can't actually act in a radically Christian way (like showing mercy to the people behind 9/11 or "resisting not evil"), because America is not legally a Christian country, can't call on supernatural / gracious principles openly (or probably can't, seems like it can't), and instead behaves secularly. And, perhaps, this is what we should expect from Jesus' "my kingdom is not of this world".

Can Christians undo the perception that America's behavior as a nation-state in some way represents Christianity? Could the US pursue (and undergo) the cross for reasons which are not explicitly religious (are secular in some sense) and thereby somewhat make the government more Christian on an unofficial level (perhaps (in its unofficialness) more real for being fiducial / practical)?)

Not voting because I'm okay with disestablishedness

I received my mail-in ballot for the California gubernatorial recall election during the writing of this post (August 2021). I decided a year or two ago to not vote anymore. I might make exceptions for nonpartisan offices or sufficiently small-scale elections. But generally, I want to be a Southern Californian who did not vote for whomever Southern Californians are assumed to vote for, and a Christian who did not vote for whomever Christians are assumed to vote for. I hope to be apolitical, and so I want to build a track record of not being on the side of people that people hate, and who hate them. My hope is that I can be a helpful citizen in the area of depolarization.

But if I don't vote in this recall election, it might make a small difference in the outcome. For voting to work, we have to approach it as though our voice matters. And the stakes in this election are non-zero. Some kind of harm could come if the wrong candidate is elected.

This bothered me for a bit. I remembered Judges, however, and thought "well, maybe having the wrong person in office is just what people need". Maybe it's better for people spiritually to have their land misgoverned. And that may be enough to satisfy me, so that I continue to not vote. But part of me thinks "We're not going to turn to God as a people if things go wrong. We're just going to have misgovernment without any spiritual benefit." I'm not sure how true that sentiment is. (Did politically conservative Christians not at all turn to God for help under Obama? Did politically liberal Christians not at all turn to God for help under Trump? Do decaying times not turn numerous individuals toward God, whether Christian or non-Christian? Is it possible that there is a level of dysfunction which is merely irritating and enraging but does not connect with deeper life (like Sartre's quote from *No Exit* about pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses but never hurts enough), that this is where we are right now, but if we break out of that to really hurt, then we will turn to God?) But I

think it is probably partly true.

Climate change will disestablish but there's likely a time after that

During the writing of this post, I happened to listen to a podcast on climate change (Michael Klare on Future of Life Institute's podcast). This reminded me of the issue. The podcast talked about how states will fail (are already stressed and failing), due to climate stresses. This will have a spillover effect on the rest of the world. The global trend will be toward more disestablishedness in the coming decades. My sense of living in the hyper-developed future will make less sense in the more immediate future, and the threat of a loveless or godless establishment (but an eminently humanistic one) will be pushed out beyond my lifetime. (Unless AI can really "save the day"...) Perhaps for whichever Christian thinkers who are not consumed with the immediate struggles of the future there could be an important job of developing a version of establishedness which acknowledges the inherent dangers of establishedness, genuinely values the good that only comes through the disestablishedness which that establishedness necessarily lacks, and does not fail to exemplify the good which tends to only come or more naturally come through disestablishedness but which can be incorporated into establishedness.

When the end of disestablishedness becomes plausible, hopefully Christian thinkers (and even more hopefully, Christian culture at large) will be ready for the challenge, possessing ideas (thought, and embodied) developed in our time. (As hinted above, according to some, AI may accelerate the process of ending disestablishedness, and if human agency and culture mean anything after AI takes over, and if the takeover occurs sooner rather than later then the challenge may come as early as this century, rather than later.)

That a disestablished world can be valuable makes anti-abortion sentiment sensible

10 December 2021: for this section, see also Disestablishedness vs. Anti-temptation.

14 August 2022: I realized that this section has a major flaw and the "patch" to fix it (at least for now) is here.

During the writing of this, Texas' abortion law was in the news, so I've thought more about the issue.

One argument for legalizing abortion is this: Christians tend to want to believe that infants who die do not go to hell. It would seem odd for God to create a child, allow him or her to die before he or she was old enough to make decisions, and then send him or her to hell (for all eternity?). If it really is the case that infants who die "go straight to heaven", then isn't abortion the best form of ensuring salvation?

Intentionally causing abortions, believing that infants are real people, would be murder, and so that's not an option for Christian consequentialists. But the question then arises: why does God not just kill us all and send us to heaven where we can be saved? Or simply create us in heaven where we are saved? Is God on the side of people not going to heaven?

I believe (following the New Wine System), that when people die, they sleep in the grave. Eventually Jesus will return and inaugurate the Millennium, and those in the grave will be resurrected, to complete their journey toward holiness. Those who have not heard the gospel (pre-Columbian American Indians, pre-contact Aborigines, ancient Chinese, many modern people, etc.) will hear it. When the Millennium is over, those who fully side with God will go to heaven, who have completed their journey, and those who do not, who have not, will go to an annihilationist hell. The Millennium is primarily a time of education in holiness. Whether people fully love God or not is the one big question of reality, a question which God can't answer just by making people be the way he wants them to be (sending them straight to heaven without letting them risk hell). To have the opportunity to love because *you* want to means that the love comes from you and no one else, your consciousness and thus your choice is the origin of it, and thus the risk of choosing to reject God.

Given this belief, I think what is most critical is to help people end up in heaven, to cause them to make the most progress toward love of God, and away from hatred of God, and the least progress toward terminal love of idols. So now, what are the purposes of life on earth, and of the Millennium? The Millennium is a time where Jesus is king and spiritually mature people rule -- an actually good theocracy. (Earthly theocracies may try to make Jesus king, officially say they do, but fail to, and may set supposedly but not really spiritually mature people over others, but these will not be the case in the Millennium.) One would think that it would be the ideal environment for people to come to love God. But if so, then shouldn't we wonder if abortions are the best thing, so that babies end up in the Millennium without being messed up by earth life?

Life on earth is perhaps better for people spiritually, on average, than the Millennium. This makes sense if we see the value of disestablishedness. Disestablishedness can be a good teacher, teaching us to trust God more deeply. All the awful things about life on earth can be spiritually beneficial, and if we added up all the benefit, we might see that living this life is overall better for humans than not to, at least for the duration of a normal human lifespan. The quantity of spiritual maturing per person per year, on average, might be higher, and to the extent that turning to God can prevent loving idols or hating God (presumably the sooner the better, if this turning to God is sound and not fake), a faster pace of spiritual

maturing might have better outcomes in the end, in terms of people saved as opposed to lost.

But the spiritual benefits of this life are unevenly distributed. This life is inherently chaotic, random, or even systemically unfair. Some people respond poorly to suffering, in that it doesn't turn them toward God. Some people, because of the way things are set up, live lives of ease, never getting the opportunity to cry out to God. Some people never hear the gospel (although they do still have relationships with God, perhaps without realizing it, and may get most or all of the spiritual benefits of this life apart from those that come from explicitly trusting in the name of Jesus). All these unfairnesses are addressed by the Millennium, which can make up for the blatant gaps in the effectiveness of this life as a spiritual regime.

This life (at its best) is a good but rough childhood, while the Millennium is a time of relative rest, learning, and healing. There are lessons better learned in a rough time of life than in a supportive one (personal responsibility and trust, especially trust of God).

It may be possible some day to bring about a government on earth that approaches the "millenniality" of the Millennium. There would be no advantage to children growing up in the Millennium instead of under that government -- at most, they could be equally beneficial. And so, there will never be a clear spiritual reason to abort babies (under New Wine assumptions, as given here). But this requires us to value the disestablishedness of this life, and consider it a spiritual asset, so that we don't automatically think that simply sending children to heaven (or the Millennium) is better.

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So one might think that the best government on earth is the most disestablished one we can stand. However, one of the natural consequences of people behaving the way God wants them to (part of spiritual maturity, something that over time follows from genuinely loving God), is for people to behave in establishing ways. So there's a kind of double-bind: in order to *become* saved, disestablishedness is best, but in order to *have been* saved, establishedness is best, or a natural corollary. We can deliberately be disestablishing in ways that are not sinful (I imagine this is part of the Millennium, of millenniality), but overall we will still be more established than the least-established possible state of affairs in life on earth, which might on average be more effective in developing the sides of spiritual maturity that this life is uniquely good at developing.

Fraternity of disestablishedness

As I was getting closer to finishing work on this post, I read a little bit of the book on climate change that came in the mail, which I intend to focus

on when this post is done (the book is *All Hell Breaking Loose*, by Michael Klare). I am reading the book as research for my book on the cross, but found the following part relevant to this post:

> Klare p. 12 "A world of multiple failed states, vast 'ungoverned spaces,' and recurring mass migrations would pose mammoth challenges for the United States, no matter how hard we try to avert our eyes from the chaos."
>
> When we are disestablished, we face the problems other people face. (A "fraternity of disestablishedness".) We find it more natural to pursue the cross (risk ourselves for the benefit of others) if we are disestablished in such a way to feel like we are part of the disestablished world.

Recall Day

Editing of this post has continued until 14 September, the day of the California gubernatorial recall election. The results are not in and I feel a kind of uncertainty. Celibate people are not necessarily asexual, and those who choose to be apolitical may still have political desires. I didn't vote, but will the election turn out the way my instincts seem to think I wanted it to? It may be hard to tell any sexual desire from lust, from its phenomenology, although there may be legitimate sexual desires. Similarly, a political desire may feel the same whether it is (spiritually) legitimate or not. An illegitimate political desire is something like sexual lust.

The thirst for (political and personal) establishedness can be a kind of lust. Perhaps the desire for establishedness is a necessary thing, just as sexual desire seems to be needed to keep humanity going. But it is like the bearing of the Ring in *Lord of the Rings*, both necessary and dangerous.

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Now they have announced the results of the election. I feel free of the question, whether it turned out the way I wanted to or not, and in fact, my yearning uncertainty dissipated before I heard them. Spirits come in and out of my experience body, something I have to learn to take into account.

The Cross

Refounding with the cross

Jesus left his establishedness, came to be disestablished on earth, and then was disestablished to the point of death on the cross. It was his willingness to be disestablished which made him able to refound reality on a better footing, a better establishedness.

Establishedness and the cross

What is the relationship between the concept of establishedness from this post, and the concept of the cross (from the book I'm writing)?

This is a question that I find important, and once I explain my concept of the cross, you may find it important as well. I'm not sure exactly what I will end up thinking the cross is, but a working definition is: "self-risking, of death and of undergoing experiences that from a human perspective seem as bad as or worse than death, which may be forced on a person by life, and which therefore requires a difficult 'leaving of security'; a self-risking which is pursued for the sake of altruism (secular or theistic); both the deliberate or semi-deliberate pursuit of that kind of self-risking altruism and the undergoing of the consequences of pursuing that risk".

Extreme disestablishedness leads to death (if your body is completely disestablished, you die, and to the extent that humans don't need bodies, if your personality is completely disestablished, you don't exist anymore). What does extreme establishedness lead to? Establishedness without any disestablishedness does not trust, and thus is impersonal. It is a spiritual death. So both of these extremes are dangers. Pursuing the cross is perhaps a way to guard against overvaluing establishedness. Undergoing the cross brings disestablishedness. Pursuing the cross (if you are a theist) is an act of trust in God (and if you are not can still be an act of trust). Undergoing the cross gives a person (perhaps numerous) opportunities to trust God.

Altruism (generally) seeks to establish. True altruism would seek to establish true well-being (whatever that turns out to be). There is good and bad establishment, good and bad well-being. The cross is a way to be altruistic. It goes through a path of disestablishedness, in order to establish true well-being. The cross (as Jesus experienced it, at least), is a path to shame, to losing. Undergoing the cross often involves confrontation with the spiritual reality of being put to shame, and losing. The cross is part of being a disciple of Jesus. To be a Christian, we must seek to undergo shame and losing. But the way to do this is through the cross. If being like Jesus is an essential part of legitimacy (which I think it may be), then we need to have his values. If we value undergoing shame and losing, then we value a kind of disestablishedness. We no longer see victory in the ordinary human way. Our personalities ought to be forever marked by pursuing and undergoing the cross. We should become like Jesus.

Jesus (in the end) might be imaged as a weird, frightening power, or as a lamb with its throat cut (the same person because the power comes from the authority of having been the kind of person to willingly undergo the cross). Or he could be imaged as a friend, visiting friends, with wounds in his side and hands. We have to be willing to pay and we should be marked, like Jesus. The cross is a basic feature of any legitimacy (we must always be willing to risk our own death and the experiences that are worse

than death for what is the best, whatever the best may turn out to be, in order to value it as the best, as first with us -- the best, by definition, deserves it). To trust is to say "this is worth undergoing", to value with "skin in the game." So now our concept of legitimacy (of establishedness on the deepest level), involves us trusting and thus in a sense valuing defeat and disestablishedness (on a shallower level).

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Objection: in Hebrews 12:2, Jesus "despises the shame" of the cross. So how could he value it? The valuing we do with trusting is different than the valuing we do when we have opinions about things. (We trust "with our bodies" and have opinions / despise "with our eyes".) (Or in some other way, Jesus disvalued it on one level while valuing it on another.) That's the brief "philosophical" answer. Would Jesus really have been prone to shame? Overall he seems like someone who was past that area of life. On the other hand, I wouldn't expect the Jesus of most of the Gospels to have struggled so much in Gethsemane. Maybe Jesus did feel shame on the cross, even though he "despised it" (thought little of it?) sufficient to launch himself toward Gethsemane. The really critical moment in Jesus' life is Gethsemane -- if you want to call him Victor, that's where he won, but the way that he won was through abjection, and it would be fitting if the completion of the victory, his death, would go through the way of abjection, both that of his cry of godforsakenness (as a real cry of psychological godforsakenness) and of shame (out of a real sense of defeat, of being shown to be a failure, of being held up physically naked in front of everyone).

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7 September 2023: When I re-read this while reviewing the blog, I found the idea that we "must seek to undergo shame and losing" interesting and unfamiliar. The cross makes a lot of sense if it is pursued because it's the only way to do something necessary -- so the point is to accomplish something, and the undergoing of it is a side effect. Undergoing the cross is costly, could prevent the doing of good. But I think if I want to defend the idea that we must seek to undergo shame and losing, I would say it is to understand Jesus and what he went through. The disciple eventually, to a large extent, becomes the teacher, by going through the way of the teacher.

Maybe we can understand him without going through what he went through? If not, or for those who do need to experience something essentially like Jesus' Gethsemane and crucifixion (facing a decision worse than death, and death or the suffering that is worse than death, being willing to die, facing pain, shame, and loss), whatever lack of testing there is in this life in that area can be made up for in the Millennium.

Church

Dangers of establishment Christianity

(Sidebar: Establishment Christianity: the more established Christianity is, the easier it is to be a Christian, and the less likely it is for people's discipleship to resemble that which Jesus described (less likely to be hated for it, to have broken relationships because of it, to in any sense be on the path to execution (carry your cross) because of it). The less Christians understand what it was like to be Jesus, and the cheaper and easier it is to bear the name of Christian.)

The spiritual danger of there being a scholarly consensus on the Bible

The establishedness of the scholarly consensus on the Bible. If they are wrong, who can contradict them? We go down with them, like Israel going down with their kings. It might be that most or even all of their positions are correct, but if their establishedness keeps us from loving God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, if they produce a sense of "the experts have these things figured out, I don't have to engage, myself -- in fact, I'm not qualified, so I should stop trying to understand" or if people start taking Christianity for granted because it's been so right for so long (no longer understand what it's like to be Jeremiah or Elijah, nor mourn the fact that we no longer understand that, having valorized establishedness so much with our wealth of Bible knowledge), then perhaps for all that we know, we have undermined the thing that really matters.

Can New Testament and Old Testament vibes coexist?

As I've been focusing on writing this post, I have somewhat neglected the project which I had been working on before, which is a book about the cross, pursuing it and undergoing it. Once you have gone through the cross, everything is made new, a typically "New Testament" idea. Perhaps it is more Christian to be "crucial" and to be made new, than it is to mourn the past and see the mixedness of things. Perhaps the latter is a more "Jewish" or "Old Testament" view. The energy (the vibe, motion, quality of the psychological power) of cross-based thinking is on the surface incompatible with that of looking back on mixedness, and remembering loss.

I find it possible to make space in myself for both the Old Testament and the New. The New Testament does not erase the Old Testament, but adds to it. It provides an additional context but does not take back the old words, or somehow make it so that God did not feel the way he did or be the way he was in Old Testament times. (Similarly the Old Testament is contextualized by the New.) Likewise Scripture does not take away from reason, but adds to it. Reason is seeing from our own points of view, and thus is linked to empathy. We can empathize with God as he sees the

mixedness and loss from human history.

One writer who may have been attempting to reconcile the two (Old and New) is Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* is a story of the cross which has a bittersweet ending. When I read the trilogy first, I was in elementary school. I don't remember why I liked it, other than the writing style, but I did like it. I know I didn't pick up on some of the themes of bittersweetness and loss which Tolkien intended (and I would doubt that most of the readers in the various waves of Tolkien fandom did).

Maybe the relatively triumphant resurrection and ascension ending in the original cross story are more joyous and clear than the ending of LOTR. But perhaps Tolkien was being more true to reality by adding to the history of the Biblical period the history of the Church afterward. (The triumph we might read into the cross is provisional and in a sense premature.) Maybe we should look at the ascension as not really being the end of Jesus' cross, but his transition to a new cross, the ongoing cross. It seems that whatever we do to each other, we do to him. The Church's history, as viewed by us as we are still in it and are trying to win through it, might be different than what we would see if we were in captivity like the Jews, no longer able to try to fix anything, just remembering what went wrong. In heaven, on the important metric of "can we help bring any more people to salvation?", there is no more winning, only having won what was already won, and having lost what has been lost.

I could make a simplistic history of the Church that resembles that of Israel: start out disestablished, obtain establishment, become corrupt, disaffect itself, split, civil war, lose its establishment, go into (secular) captivity (which we forget is even captivity -- a psychological captivity of blindness), suffer the spiritual consequences. There is a lot of mixedness in the history of the Church. Sometimes we see it (or simply the downside, unambivalently) when we consider humanistic concerns, like Church support of slavery. But there is more to see if we look through deeply theistic lenses. We can try to blame and fix (two sides of the same coin), but someday we may have to just see reality as it is and has been, and not how it should be according to our desires. We will see its irrevocable losses. This is one of the lenses which God, as a truthful being, must see through, I think.

Progressive and Conservative Christians are both humanists, in a way; there's such a thing as theism

There can be a sense that "having the answer isn't the answer". Answer-having in itself, apart from whatever the answer is, is not firmly trustworthy. This may explain why some people choose progressive or postmodern-leaning Christianity over more orthodox Christianity. I agree that orthodox Christianity in itself (the repository of correct doctrines and practices), if taken apart from the specific doctrines and practices

themselves (which may really be good), is a deficient and untrustworthy thing. But I think that refusing to have an answer is itself having the answer to some kind of question, and is equally deficient and untrustworthy. Both sides can rightly object to each other, because they are both lacking.

I think just realizing that we are all lacking in all we do, that everything we pursue is lacking, that all of our answers (even anti-answer answers) are deficient, partially describes a third option, other than orthodox and progressive. I think orthodox doctrines are usually right (or, I think what people think of as orthodox doctrines usually really are, although I should give the caveat that I haven't thoroughly explored this question for myself). But no matter how right we are to hold them, we, and our Christianity, are deficient. Similarly, to not sin is worth doing, and if our practices as Christians successfully turn us away from sin, that's good. But our Christianity is still deficient.

In the midst of all this deficiency, one would hope that at least God could be not-deficient. It's true that God isn't deficient, but our images of God probably are, and if we properly understand God we understand non-deficiency in a different way. God is not "All-Powerful" even if ultimately he could choose to end the universe at any moment (as I believe he has the power to do). Power doesn't make God non-deficient. What makes God God is his reality -- his disposition to undergo everything. I think both progressives and conservatives have in the back of their heads that God exists to keep us children, to take care of things for us. We don't want to undergo everything, so God does it for us, but because we don't trust that undergoing by being willing to go through it ourselves, and better, to go through it, we have no personal understanding of what God does. And so we think that God exists to serve us, either in a blatantly humanistic way, as with the progressives, or as with the conservatives (to the extent that they too are not blatantly humanistic), to enforce establishedness and rule over us, which is also humanistic to the extent that it satisfies our desire for order and answers. It serves that purpose of ours. It's one kind of humanism or the other, and the two humanists fight it out because it's personal -- it's what *they* want. We don't realize that true theism is possible -- God can be harmed and can exist for himself, not just as the means to our own benefit. If reality is by definition what is most established (it is what it is, after all, and no one can argue with it), then what is more real than God? But the tonality of God is entirely different than that of the establishedness we tend to prefer. God is the kind of being to get beaten up by the side of the road.

I think that what is deficient in us is a lack of love. I hesitate to use the word "love" because it's loaded. Whatever version of love people are already into is pretty psychologically compelling, so if we're wrong, it's hard for us to change, and it's likely to subtly mislead us. But perhaps

"love" can be defined (looking to what we can do about the way things are) as "the cross" and (looking to the way things are and have been, in themselves) as something like "mournful history". These are the ways in which we truly value what is and what was.

Church as a safe place for danger

What's important is that individuals have the good disestablishedness (good in itself, or instrumentally good) they need to become close to God. A society can be established, overall. But it still has to permit some disestablishedness.

A church can be a safe place in a chaotic environment (I imagine that is how it can be in the Northern Triangle, or how it was in the early Middle Ages in the former Western Roman Empire). But if there is ever a shortage of disestablishedness in the world, perhaps the church can be a less-established place than the world, a refuge from safety, convenience, and so on. Practically speaking, this might mean that church leaders concern themselves less with protecting their congregants, less with promoting order and decorum, less with providing (even spiritual) wealth, letting people fend for themselves spiritually and hurt each other. However, to continue to "feed Jesus' sheep", as Peter was commanded, they would still provide some kind of strengthening or anti-temptation.

The church could be like Solomon and be a bad establishedness

Is it possible for the church to be "Solomonic"? To establish God's house but love wealth, and friendship with society which is against God or orthogonal to God, and from that turn against God? It seems likely. Solomon's 666 talents of gold (1 Kings 10:14) may have something to do with the number 666 in Revelation. Through Solomon, we see that the church can be like Babylon.

Some churches are more established than others (more at risk). All Christians in wealthy nations are at risk of being filled up with wealth and having no room for God, or little room.

Solomon was wealthy in wisdom, and the church is at risk of becoming wealthy in wisdom. Even possessing beliefs that are 100% true, or the best truths, or the set of best available truths, can be dangerous (they can mislead despite being correct in themselves).

Conclusions

(When I made this section, I thought there would end up being more than one conclusion-like passage in my notes, but there was only one.)

Eternal lack and fullness as good disestablishedness

It's possible to trust in a completely established way (to be receptive to enhancement that you don't need because you're completely established, to

be receptive to blessing). ["Receptivity to enhancement" is Joseph Godfrey's definition of trust from *Trust of People, Words, and God*.] But there is a kind of trust which requires the trusting person to be disestablished, and this is the deeper trust. Is trust of God a self-destroying tendency? So that as we trust God more and more, we become more and more established (our problems get solved), and so we become less capable of trusting deeply?

[I now think that receptivity itself inherently is or requires a disestablishedness, so I don't endorse the first sentence of the last paragraph. But there's still a difference between a minimally receptive, maximally established trusting being and one who is more receptive and less established.]

It is conceivable that as we trust God, we become established in some ways, but in others become more and more disestablished, so that we trust more and more deeply. We are established because we are continually being established by the legitimacy of God, but the establishedness runs out of us rapidly enough that we need to be continually filled.

This sounds sort of like *bhakti*, like a Hindu approach to spirituality. (Or perhaps a Muslim one.) Is it sufficiently Christian? Could it be compatible with Christianity? Jesus promises a woman at a well that he can give her living water (John 4):

> 1 Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard
> that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John
> 2 (although Jesus himself didn't baptize, but his disciples), 3
> he left Judea and departed into Galilee. 4 He needed to pass
> through Samaria. 5 So he came to a city of Samaria called
> Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son
> Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being tired
> from his journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth
> hour.
>
> 7 A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her,
> "Give me a drink." 8 For his disciples had gone away into the
> city to buy food.
>
> 9 The Samaritan woman therefore said to him, "How is it that
> you, being a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan
> woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)
>
> 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who
> it is who says to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked
> him, and he would have given you living water."

> 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw
> with, and the well is deep. So where do you get that living
> water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us
> the well and drank from it himself, as did his children and his
> livestock?"
>
> 13 Jesus answered her, "Everyone who drinks of this water
> will thirst again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I
> will give him will never thirst again; but the water that I will
> give him will become in him a well of water springing up to
> eternal life."
>
> 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I
> don't get thirsty, neither come all the way here to draw."
>
> 16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."
>
> 17 The woman answered, "I have no husband."
>
> Jesus said to her, "You said well, 'I have no husband,' 18 for
> you have had five husbands; and he whom you now have is
> not your husband. This you have said truly."

She thirsted (she desired people enough to have five husbands), but didn't need to thirst anymore. Yet, if she had a well of water springing up in her, where would all that water go? One possibility is that she would always be broken (or, put less negatively, be porous) and thus she would permanently need the water, and her porosity would be a permanent disestablishedness. Another possibility is that she would be completely whole and established, and the water would overflow out of her, so that God would no longer be a deep need for her, but rather a blessing, something extra.

If the latter, then there is something lost, that Hindu- or Muslim-tinged dimension of human feeling, of love (and, in Biblical terms, the Psalmists loved God in a similar way that can only be experienced firsthand from a place of disestablishedness). If the former, then there is disestablishedness in God's rest, somewhere in it.

It is true that there is a kind of thirst that is evil and leads to sin (a lot of thirst is that way). But there is a thirst that is good and leads to love of God. Either somehow what Jesus says here is not incompatible with that, or this is something good that is lost in heaven.

There are other passages that talk of living water. Jeremiah 2:13:

> 13 "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the spring of living waters, and cut out cisterns for themselves: broken cisterns that can't hold water.

In this chapter God is angry that Israel seeks establishedness from spiritual sources that aren't reliable. Also, Jeremiah 17:

> 7 "Blessed is the man who trusts in Yahweh, and whose confidence is in Yahweh. 8 For he will be as a tree planted by the waters, who spreads out its roots by the river, and will not fear when heat comes, but its leaf will be green, and will not be concerned in the year of drought. It won't cease from yielding fruit.

followed by

> 13 Yahweh, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be disappointed. Those who depart from me will be written in the earth, because they have forsaken Yahweh, the spring of living waters.

And in Zechariah 14:

> 8 It will happen in that day that living waters will go out from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea, and half of them toward the western sea. It will be so in summer and in winter.
>
> 9 Yahweh will be King over all the earth. In that day Yahweh will be one, and his name one.
>
> 10 All the land will be made like the Arabah, from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem; and she will be lifted up and will dwell in her place, from Benjamin's gate to the place of the first gate, to the corner gate, and from the tower of Hananel to the king's wine presses. 11 Men will dwell therein, and there will be no more curse; but Jerusalem will dwell safely.

There is a kind of establishedness which is good, which prevents the disestablishedness that is bad. The human taste for establishedness leads us to seek "water" from various sources. We can learn to trust in (thirst for) good water, or bad, and thus learn to love good, instead of bad.

I can see how a reader of these verses might think that the good is solely formed of establishedness, that God only wants us to be established, only

using disestablishedness to teach us to seek good establishment. To do this kind of post most properly, I should read the entire Bible, and that's something that appeals to me, but which I don't have time for right now. So there are verses I'm not considering. But one important one to remember is this (Matthew 22):

> 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?"
>
> 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment.

Suppose you were trying to obey this. Maybe you were an Indian Christian, and sought to make an album of worship music. The music you made (perhaps sounding something like this) owes some debt to Hindu and Muslim culture, the cultural climate of India. You yourself feel devotion in a way which is somewhat "bhakti-like". So you produce lyrics which have a yearning in them, and a kind of mysterious darkness to them, the darkness of love for Jesus. Your heart, as it is, loves God in this way. There is nothing (obviously) sinful about this love, but at the same time, there is something disestablished about it.

Another scenario. You are a Christian raised in, and regularly attending, an orthodox Western church. Your life is flat and solid, and you have no deep understanding of the scriptures. You can't understand what the psalmists are talking about. You have never been forgiven much, and you do not love much. You have never undergone the cross, nor have you walked in the wilderness. You know the doctrines of the Bible with great accuracy, but you don't understand what they mean on an emotional level. Are you loving God with all of your heart? Maybe that is the case, and your heart really is that narrow. But it could be the case that you are not. Perhaps even if it is narrow, you ought to expand your heart. The difference between expanding a narrow heart (by, for instance, sewing on a new chamber) and simply causing a heart to expand to its true size (by stretching it out) may not matter much. Loving God with all of your strength may mean that you must expand your heart deliberately.

With all that in mind, perhaps with great discipline (and little emotion), you set out to learn to love with your heart and your guts, putting your life on the line. Having done this, you learn new dimensions of love for God and would never want to go back to your "perfect" establishedness (your initial flatness and solidity of life). Now that you have expanded your heart, you can't go back without loving God with less than your full heart. Disestablishedness is part of your love. You were brought out of the captivity, the broken cistern, of dead establishedness, and are now drinking water like a tree, up through your roots and out through your

leaves. Establishedness on one dimension can be a broken cistern on another, while disestablishedness on one dimension can be a flow of water through yourself on another, and thus, establishedness. Establishedness for a living being (or an ecosystem) is different than establishedness for a mathematical fact or a stone monument.

It is possible that some of the ways of loving we have known are somehow not what God wants, and he only wants pure establishedness in the end, without any disestablishedness. If I were only thinking about God on the basis of reason (through answering the question "what do I think God / love is like?" or through a more disciplined natural theology), I would see no reason to think that disestablishedness can't be a part of Legitimacy, that the greatest forms of trust (and therefore of love) require disestablishedness of some sort, and that whatever loving-disestablishedness which comes only with enduring unbearable suffering (suffering which must someday cease, because God finds it unbearable as well) is a regrettable loss, a (necessary) amputation of love.

But I can see that the Bible, if read from an ordinary human lens, may seem to imply otherwise. I think that the best meeting place between my reason-based theology and the Bible is Jeremiah's image of the tree planted by the stream. I could see in that image an opening for a tree that might be deeply and powerfully thirsty, and which would drink from the stream with a great drawing of water, but the water would be continually transpiring from the leaves of the tree (and in fact, with trees, it is the transpiring which draws the water). As a tree's thirst connects it with the stream, so our thirst connects us with God. If we only drink from God, we will not be thirsty for the bad alternatives (lies, "five husbands", "kings").

The way this is written may seem like I could be saying that people ought to have a particularly large number of leaves and live in a particularly hot climate so that they can drink much and transpire much. I think sheer quantity of trusting is neither good nor bad. Real love is better than merely big love. So it may be just as well to have fewer leaves and live in a cooler climate. But for some people, real love may require big love, and the passion of that love may require thirst and the feelings we might associate with some Muslim, Hindu, and Ancient Jewish cultures, and not so much with modernized Greco-Roman and New Testament cultures (nor perhaps some Buddhist cultures).

I'm hitting the limits of what I can (more or less) responsibly write right now about trust, given how much I've thought about it, but I think something like the depth of trusting matters more than the quantity. Perhaps it is like certain quantities of trusting at certain times open up parts of our persons, and those persons (we) are more trusting because of it, even if the "throughput" of water has gone down. I think that mourning (both involuntary, sometimes, and more-voluntary) and the cross (both involuntary, sometimes, and more-voluntary) open up levels of trusting

that enable us to empathize and be kin with God, in the realness of his love. God himself, even in heaven, his rest, will be disestablished to the extent that some of his children are not there. In order to trust God's disestablishedness (to personally find it valuable, to voluntarily be conscious of it) we must participate in it.

Is it possible to love someone if you take them for granted? Can you listen to someone if you have no sense of hanging on what they are about to say? I think the answer to both questions is "no". Both require a kind of disestablishedness on the part of the lover. But perhaps there's kind of a LeGuinian ordinariness to the not-taking-for-granted and the hanging-on-the-answer of people who love and listen, which is not a thirst, but which is still a disestablishedness.

So either because love, when brought to its fullness, requires a trust which itself requires a certain disestablishedness, or because to be kin with God means that we share in his disestablishedness and loss, maximal establishedness in some way contains a kind of disestablishedness. There are disestablishednesses which deserve to exist forever, and thus which are legitimate and part of Legitimacy.

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[Here is a (hopefully complete) list of "living water" references. Most of them do not affect what I've said above, but here are two that might: Revelation 7:15-17 says that God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes." This does not necessarily rule out a quieter mourning, or a joy that is tempered such that it is consistent with the fact that some people did not make it into heaven. It also says that "they will hunger / thirst no more". That may refer to natural hungers (for food or people), and not to a hunger for God. Being "sheltered with his presence" (vs. 15) may be a relationship of dependency, and to be truly dependent is at least objectively if not necessarily subjectively to be disestablished. John 7:37-39 says that the living water Jesus talks about is the Spirit. Does the Spirit take away our hunger for God? Hunger is a disestablishedness.]

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[I mentioned that the Psalms show a love of God that is found in disestablishedness, but a sampling of them makes me suspect that when they do, they do as part of the brokenness of life (Psalm 42's "as the deer pants for water" is followed by what sounds like a psalmist going through something dark). Therefore it's something that may have to pass away in heaven. This would be a loss. But I think another way to anchor a belief in a good thirst in the Bible, which may be applicable to heaven, is to consider the conjunction of Song of Solomon and Revelation. Song of Solomon says that the flashes of love are the flame of the LORD (8:6). So some element of eroticism connects to God. I believe (from natural

theology) that God experiences what we do, in some sense interpreting it as we do (like how a word means basically the same thing to two people, although they hear different connotations in it). Eroticism means something similar to God as it does to us. This isn't to say that God sexually desires (maybe you have to have a body of your own, one which in a sense rules over you like ours rule over us to be sexual), but eroticism is broader than that. I think it includes a kind of perpetual thirst.

Revelation strikes me as being similar to Song of Solomon. Both have the mixture of beautiful dream and nightmare, and both are about becoming something new, and about the psychological upheaval and overwhelmingness of that process. Revelation talks about the Bride, and Song of Solomon talks about a bride. I agree with people that Song of Solomon is about regular sexuality, but if the church is called a Bride in Revelation, it seems natural to connect eroticism to the church's relationship with Christ. Calling the church (a group of people) a woman, shows that there is some distance between "Bride" and church, that "Bride" is somewhat of a metaphor. But we don't know how much it is a metaphor, and so, I think, we may assume similarity unless we have a reason to doubt it. A group of people (as in Judges 10) could have a kind of intimacy (a political intimacy) with God (in that case the intimacy of children with father), and so, I would guess, a political intimacy could involve some kind of eroticism, or something like eroticism. I don't know if this is a watertight proof that a "good thirst that never goes away" is projected to be part of heaven by the Bible, but it might be, and if it's not, then something is lost.]

Conclusion

Perhaps that should have been the conclusion of this post, or something with a similar feeling. But the post that actually exists still has some ground to cover.

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I found as I read this post through for the first time, mostly finished, that I liked my own writing better than the parts where I engaged with the Bible. Perhaps that is because I quoted the Bible at length, in order to give context, but somehow it is more enjoyable to read the Bible all by itself and not quoted in a blog post. That is what I found.

Another reason might be that the Bible is a pit of disputes, whereas my writing has every right to be what it is (my writing). I wonder if I love philosophy about God more than I do adhering to the Bible.

That is, if I take up the banner of "sola scriptura", then I have to go where the Bible leads me, into disputes where my opposing interlocutors (implacable animated beings empowered by my imagination) have all the

weight of tradition and the cognitively heavy data of scholarship. How can I, by myself, dare to say that the Bible says something untraditional? I feel that's what I'm doing.

But if I do not take up the banner of "sola scriptura", then my reason can inform which reasonably-valid interpretation of the Bible I favor. And then my unhappiness dissipates. It is not hard to see ambiguity, mixedness, brokenness, the cross, and mourning woven into the Bible, as I've seen in the readings I did for this post.

I hope that my vision overall can be pieced together from the things I wrote above. I have talked about different dimensions of establishedness and disestablishedness, and how they relate to the Bible and to secular and church life.

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Strong government has the downside of giving people too much establishedness, including bad establishedness, but the upside of preventing horrors. Weaker government has the downside of permitting horrors, but the upside of breaking bad establishedness.

If you want to help people connect with God, naively instituting either weaker or stronger government may not work. (People may not turn to God in distress, for instance.) Political interventions by themselves can be largely orthogonal to spiritual change. But in theory, since everything interrelates, any political establishment or change in establishment, or any disestablishment, should have some kind of spiritual effect. And if you know what you're doing, you may be able to make better educated guesses about the spiritual effects of political interventions. You may also make better educated guesses about what kinds of spiritual interventions to make (for instance, ways to prepare people so that when disestablishedness comes, they are likely to turn to God.)

Our attitudes about "unlackingness" (what being "desires") and our view of God are related. Humanism (seemingly both secular and Christian) is into wealth and nice living (establishedness), but God is into love. God is not a projection of "the wealthiest, most established being". Wealth can be part of love, but in order to be subordinate to love, we must remember the poor and awful side of love (disestablished), the cross and mourning. Disestablishedness can transform stale wealth and nice living (the default of humanism) through trust (trust requires or is disestablishedness). Trust is psychological life. Promoting the love of love (the cross, mourning, of God in all his complex history) and the maximization of trust, and in addition any effective anti-temptations we can devise, seem to me to be good starting educated guesses as a program for changing how people relate to reality, so that whatever happens in the political world will translate into spiritual gain.

I remember one of my professors, Carlos Puente, telling me that if you take random data (he might have been dealing with rainfall) and project it through some function, the output, no matter what the input, is a bell curve (his book *The Fig Tree and the Bell* may be talking about this in the Lessons from Fractal Wires chapter). Similarly, if we have the right function, the meaninglessness of life, the random, deterministic impersonal inputs (including political chaos) that are easy to relate to as such, can affect the meaningful spiritual life. (They can become material for relating to God.) Both God's and even Satan's messages, if heeded, can generally turn out to further God's interests given the right "transforming function".

So I would say that, spiritually speaking, whether the government is established or not doesn't matter as much as how well people are prepared to convert whatever political reality they find themselves in into a seeking of God. Both establishedness and disestablishedness are mixed, and under the right circumstances, disestablishedness can be more to our benefit than establishedness (so it seemed in the days of Judges). If we need to hear a message but don't want to listen to it, what better way than to be in pain (blunt as that instrument is)? But better that we want to hear the right messages, so that pain is not necessary. To desire to hear is to be disestablished, in a trusting way.

Ideally, humans would need no government because humans would not sin. Or, the government would exist but in no way be coercive, but simply be an advisory body that researched recommended ways to live. Libertarians and anarchists may dream of such a day. The way to get there (not that it's likely we can on earth at a large scale) is through internalizing the Law of God, along with all the best epilaw or episcripture. By internalizing God's Law, we become more fully kin to God, and this enables a simpler and fuller intimacy with him, as between a father and a congruent adult child.

There are dimensions of love which can only be expressed when things go wrong. Perhaps there are levels of understanding of God that can only be accessed if we suffer. While God's rest is the inevitable and necessary conclusion of existence, and is the most legitimate possible state of affairs, even it has something missing, the expression and development of this most profound side of love. True well-being is not just the enjoyment of wealth (of even the right kind), but being the kind of person who loves most and most truly. Disestablishedness enables us to connect to this, in ways that establishedness usually does not.

Therefore, it is not clear to me that establishedness is better than disestablishedness (nor that disestablishedness is always better than establishedness). A case can be made for why "judges" are better than "kings" (and for why "US government" is better than "Northern Triangle government"). There is establishedness which really is bad, and disestablishedness that is bad, and establishedness that is good, and

disestablishedness that is good, and examples of both that are ambiguous, ambivalent, or inscrutable. There may be times where we more or less know to change a bad situation into a good, on a political level. But what matters most is what people make of their situation spiritually, and that which helps them make more of whatever they have, on that level.

Culture evolves slowly and the future is coming on fast. Hedonism and preference satisfaction (seeking psychological wealth) are ingrained in our culture. I am concerned that by default, they will become the tonality of psychological establishedness in the future. Establishedness and wealth have a natural affinity, while disestablishedness and wealthless love have a natural affinity. It seems wise to me to intentionally emphasize the elements of love which are likely to be lost if humans get what they want. This good disestablishedness is something which we should cultivate in ourselves, and value for ourselves. In this way, we may have a chance to keep the future from becoming spiritually stunted.

To an extent, failure to grow spiritually, as soon as possible, is spiritually dangerous. Perhaps there are levels of deep (and therefore dark) turning to God which are not required of everyone, but perhaps it is better to experience some kind of darkness (enabled by a political or social system which is not maximally established) now and reap the spiritual benefits for many years to come, avoiding the spiritual risks of never learning to trust.

Appendix: notes from Bible reading

Judges

1:1-2 The people of Israel inquire of God what to do and God gives a specific command.

1:19 God was with Judah.

1:21 The Benjamites didn't do what they were told (and God allowed it)

1:27 similarly w/ Manasseh (following verses: similarly with other tribes)

2:1-5 God says to Israel that they have sinned and foretells/ordains that they will suffer the consequences.

2:11-15 Israel does evil and God punishes them.

2:16-23 (vss. 11-23 a summary of the rest of Judges?) God raises up judges, is with the judges, things go well until the judges die and then the people turn away from God.

(11-23 could be the "Judges Pattern" -- JP)

3:7-11 JP

3:10 the Spirit of God was upon Othniel

3:8 Israel serves a foreign king

3:12-30 JP

3:14 Israel serves a foreign king

3:15 Israel cried out to God, and God gave them a deliverer.

4:2 -- sold to a foreign king

4:6 -- God gives a specific command, which is held up by a human's fear (or some other form of resistance to action)

4:14 -- Deborah says "Does not the LORD go out before you?"

4:15 -- The LORD routes Sisera by the edge of the sword.

4:23 -- "God subdued Jabin"

ch. 5 Deborah/Barak's song (may reflect their views and not 100% God's)

5:2 "That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the LORD"

5:4-5 The LORD goes out and the earth trembles... did this literally happen? Or is it poetry referring to the literal actions of Israel? (In other words, God was acting through the army)

5:9 -- another "bless the LORD" maybe more like "praise God!" as an interjection than "God is responsible"?

6:15 Gideon asks "if God is with us, why are these horrible things happening to us?" God's response is "Go save Israel", (as though saying "Well, now I am intervening"?)

6:31 "If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down" -- words that Israel would not want to hold to too tightly when their own temples were destroyed.

6:34 The Spirit of the LORD clothes Gideon.

Judges

7:2 God intervenes by using Israel, prefers to do so by having them be undermanned so that they understand it was by his power and planning that they won.

Judges: when God doesn't intervene, he doesn't. When he intervenes, he does.

8:1 Ephraim is mad that they weren't called to fight. (The established norm of war?) If they had, that might have diluted God's story. The

"logical", "right", "best practices" way of doing things is a powerful norm but is not necessarily in favor of trusting in, loving God -- It takes social courage to resist establishment / establishedness.

8:23 Gideon refuses kingship

8:33-35 After Gideon's death, the people whore themselves after the Baals and forget Gideon's family.

9 Abimelech overturns his father's intention not to start a dynasty and kills most of his brothers to establish himself.

9:23 God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, so that they fought each other.

Did they realize that they were being moved by God? Presumably not, or else they would have trusted the spirit less ("Oh, that's not my idea, maybe I shouldn't act on it.")

9:6 Abimelech is made king

9:22 he reigns 3 years

10:1-2 Tola judges 23 years -- he is not a king. He "judges" and does not "rule" (Abimelech "ruled") (Is this word choice significant?) "there arose" him rather than people explicitly making him king (Abimelech, 9:6)

10:10 Israel realizes (as a people) that they have sinned against God by forsaking him for the Baals.

10:11-16 God is mad at Israel and says he won't save them any more. Israel says "do whatever you want. Only please deliver us this day." They put away the foreign Gods and serve the LORD and he becomes "impatient over the misery of Israel." This is a kind of political intimacy, the way God relates to the entire people (and they relate to him, in one intertwined moment) in an emotional way.

11:11 "Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah."

11:27 "The LORD, the Judge, decide this day between the people of Israel and the people of Ammon". God is both judge and king. How do these roles differ?

11:40 daughters of Israel lament Jephthah's daughter for four days a year. (Do we have analogous emotional responses?)

Judges 12:1-7 Civil war happens on God-as-king's / a judge's watch.

Judges 13:9 - God answers Manoah's prayer

Samson and Gideon were chosen by God (as were Saul and David).

13:19 (Not clear if it says "The LORD, who works wonders", or "the LORD,

and working wonders")

14:4 God is the one who gets Samson to be romantically interested in Philistine women.

14:6 The Spirit of the LORD gives Samson strength.

14:19 The Spirit of the LORD empowers him to kill people to technically fulfill the terms of the riddle.

15:18-19 God answers Samson's prayer for water.

ch. 16 God answers Samson's prayer for vengeance.

17:1-6 Dedicating silver to the LORD by making idols out of it.

(Would a king have had a firmer, more consistent state religion which successfully preached and enforced orthodoxy? In principle, that sounds more likely than in a disestablished political system.)

18:1 There was no king and Dan hadn't gotten an inheritance. (arguably a king would have figured that out)

Ch 19 Gibeah is as bad as Sodom so things have gotten pretty bad without a king. Shocking, brutal evil (such as is fairly common in the Northern Triangle, according to Martínez).

20:18 God gives Israel direction in how to punish Benjamin.

20:23 Israel weeps (for having to fight their brothers?) and God says to keep fighting them.

20:26-28 Same pattern

21:15 "The LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel" The people had compassion but it took the form of human trafficking.

End of Judges: no one wins and the consequences of sin are brutal and unfair. The people have a point when they want a king. God needs to adjust -- or the people do.

Spiritual significance: because things got so bad on the ground, Israel is tempted to not trust God.

1 Sam. 1:19 God "remembers" Hannah (opens her womb)

1:5 God had closed Hannah's womb.

2:10 "The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed."

Was Hannah prophesying Jesus? Or Saul or David? Was she in the Spirit? (In vs. 1 she "derides" her enemies). Is she expressing a hope of people in

her day that there would be a king?

If she was prophesying a king (like Saul), is it significant that she did so after the end of Judges, but before when the people ask for a king in 1 Samuel? As though God was already considering having a king? If she was prophesying Jesus, was the timing of the prophecy meant to convey that at that point God was revealing to whoever was really listening that there would be another king someday?

1 Sam. 2:25 "They wouldn't listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death."

1 Sam. 2:27-36 God may be saying (vs. 35) that there will be a king to come, "forever" sounds like "before Jesus", so God as king. But maybe he mentions this because around this time he's considering giving Israel an earthly king (a David, earthly type of Christ)? (God intervenes by sending a man of God to Eli.)

Ch. 3 God speaks to Samuel and foretells more action to come.

2:12-17 Under the "Judges" system (direct kingship of God), there were corrupt priests.

4:7-9 The Israelites try to frighten the Philistines with God (the ark) but the Philistines take God (the threat) so seriously that it gives them the courage to defeat the Israelites.

(Lack of establishment -- enduring breakdown times -- can develop courage as well, leading to better future establishment.)

4:21-22 The ark was part of Israel's establishedness.

5:6 God punishes Ashdod for having the ark.

5:10-11 Ekron responds to the reality of God when they are afflicted. "There was a deathly panic throughout the whole city" -- a kind of disestablishedness / political breakdown?

6:13-15 The Israelites rejoice to see the ark coming and offer sacrifices when it arrives. (Disestablished state of not having the ark makes them more appreciative? God returning makes appreciative?) God-with-us returning makes appreciative? God is often "psychological establishment" to us.)

6:19 God killed people for looking on the ark (perhaps to teach his people to respect him)

7:2-3 Israel repents after "losing" God.

8:1-3 Samuel makes his sons judges, but they are corrupt.

8:10-16 Samuel's warning against kings is that they take away people's

freedom. Established governments become their own entity (vs. 15 - the officers get the money) which take people out of their normal lives.

This sort of sounds like a libertarian's case against government.

God may have been the following: concerned about that but more concerned with then people's desire to be like the nations (vs. 20, vs. 5).

Ch. 8 - part of following God involves people in charge sinning against you. If you don't want people sinning against you so bad that you want to change God's planned form of government, then you are rejecting him. God's path is imperfect even by his own standards (sin is a part of it).

9:16-17 God saw Saul as someone who was going to save his people from the Philistines and "restrain" them.

End of judge era, beginning of king era:

10:1 - Saul made king

Ch. 10 - The Spirit of God rushes upon Saul

Saul is established by God.

10:22 Saul hides from being king.

10:24 Samuel points out that Saul is exceptional -- he is both tall and handsome (9:2) and seemingly unready to serve (perhaps the only person to hide in the baggage), prone to fear and distrust of God.

The people are pleased with Saul.

12:14 Perhaps the king and the people are bound together (certainly this seems to be the case subsequently) More so than the people and their judges?

1 Samuel 13:6-8 A time of disestablishedness (the people terrified of Philistines)

13:9-12 In a time of disestablishedness, the king is tempted to sin against God, through his fear. Saul claimed he was seeking the favor of God by sacrificing. But a better way would have been to trust and obey.

13:13 It seems that perhaps Saul was being tested and in theory could have passed, with the consequence of establishing Saul's kingdom forever. The disestablishedness enabled the test, which presumably enables passing the test and the positive consequences from passing (Saul establishing himself as, showing and making himself, trustworthy, he being a useful servant of God, worth establishing forever). Without having disestablishedness, can we have the rest? Maybe, maybe not? False establishment has to be stress-tested by disestablishedness to produce true establishment?

14:11-12 Philistines in their establishedness don't take Jonathan and his armor bearer seriously? Their cockiness is the sign that God is with the two Israelites in their plan to attack them (vs. 10).

Ch. 14 God intervenes (vs. 15, vs. 23)

14:24 Saul lays the burden of physical hunger (disestablishedness) on the people.

14:29-30 Jonathan rebels, because the (discipline?) of the vow of hunger was misapplied.

14:31-32 The disestablishedness of the Israelites tempts them to sin.

14:45 Saul's illegitimacy as a ruler meant he deserved to be less established?

14:47-48 Saul, having "taken the kingship" (having been established as a ruler), was a competent and valiant deliverer of Israel.

1 Samuel ch. 15 Talk of God's "regret" (in ESV) in vss. 11, 29, and 35. If God really does regret, he isn't always right. A less-established God? (Than classical theist God, yes). Should we be more, or less, rebellious against a God who is caught in tragedy like we are?

Reading "regret" as a normal English "regret" here (as the ESV, a modern, more-literal, more-scholarly translation allows us to) is disturbing to some conservative readers, who might prefer a God who is closer to a perfected classical theist God. Why does our image of God seem to need to be of one who "does not lie or regret"? (Who definitely does what he says he'll do / what he sets out to do.) We like establishedness, of an established and establishing God? We don't like the note of ambivalence (bittersweetness, loss, tragedy even within victory or the best?) which is implied by the most established being having any disestablishedness in him, or of there being some kind of imperfection (in Descartes' sense (in Meditation 3) of a calling for what one lacks) in establishedness itself, or in perfection itself / himself.

(Maybe it is our definition of perfection which is flawed, and we should conform it to the reality of God, rather than conforming our idea of God to our idea of perfection.)

15:1,10 God speaks

15:24-28 Though Saul remains in office (one kind of establishedness), his legitimacy is removed, and his establishedness is rendered temporary, no longer connected to the future. (A less-established establishedness for not having a future.) Legitimacy is akin to or part of establishedness.

15:9 Saul and the people disobeyed God.

1 Samuel 16:1-3 God gives Samuel a task and tells him how to proceed safely. God provides a plan (establishedness) to deal with Samuel's fear and lack of plan (disestablishedness)

16:6-7 Samuel looks to obvious signs of kingliness (establishment-bringingness?) but God's preference for the person who will be king (to some extent in God's place) is for the heart of the one to be anointed to be a certain way.

16:13-14 God gives his Spirit to David, removes it from Saul, and sends a harmful spriit to Saul.

16:14-23 God sets up (probably) a way for David to be around Saul.

1 Samuel 17 vs. 37 David had a history of being threatened by wild animals and being delivered from them by God, which gives him the confidence to oppose the giant who "defies the army of the living God" (vs. 36)

17:38 Saul wants to armor David, but David isn't used to that (he is suited to disestablishedness rather than to establishedness?)

17:51 When the Philistine's champion died, they fled. (A leader establishes his/her group of people, embodies their establishment.)

Ch. 18 David rises up, is more established in his career, yet faces psychological disestablishedness from Saul. (Mixed experience.)

19:18-24 God sends his spirit on people go go to get David.

1 Samuel chs. 1 - 20 Saul is established but lost his future, tries to hold onto establishment, won't let go of it easily, tries to kill the one with future; David is disestablished, gaining in establishment, has the future. (Israel seems to be working toward its establishment by fighting the Philistines.)

22:1-2 David becomes leader (establishment?) of those "in distress, in debt, bitter in soul" (the disestablished?) David seems to be a natural leader by this point. When God is with you, there is a natural tendency to bring establishedness? (When a nation is led well and it loses its "national sins" (e.g., there is rule of law), then economic prosperity and psychological establishedness follow.)

22:5 A prophet tells David to leave his stronghold, and he goes.

22:23 David offers safekeeping to Abiathar.

Perhaps David is taking on the role of God -- because God is with him, his establishment is effectively God's establishment for Abiathar.

Can government on earth be one of truly Godly rulers, those who don't

"misestablish" their people? Can a really God-conveying leadership or government be in exisence at scale? If we had such a government and it were perfectly established, how would it make up for the advantages of the disestablishedness it precludes?

23:1-4 God is inquired of (David feels a question (disestablishedness?)?) and God answers. Perhaps David is the conduit of his followers disestablishedness. And/or, he asks God on their behalf, perhaps such that they don't ask.

God calls David's people to go from one frightening (disestablishing?) scenario to one which looks even worse to them.

23:10-12 Once again, David asks, and God answers.

23:14 It appears that if Saul was going to capture David, God would have to have given David into Saul's hand.

23:15 David hides from Saul in the wilderness. The wilderness (disestablishedness on one level) provides refuge from Saul (establishment that opposes David). Evil establishment legitimates some kind of outside to it.

23:16 Jonathan "strengthens David's hand in God". Perhaps he helped David establish himself in God?

23:22-23 Saul seeks sure information (he is disestablished and seeks establishedness?)

1 Samuel 24:6 David recognized Saul's establishment as God's chosen one.

1 Samuel 24:20

"the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand" The nation will be established in David's exercise of his will?

25:10 Nabal seems to imply a certain amount of disestablishedness in Israel

25:21 David feels entitled to just treatment (psychological establishedness). Unlike with Saul in ch. 24, David wants to act on his perceived rights and make reality be in accordance with his claim on it. This is analogous to Nabal's rhetoric in vs. 11, in that there Nabal was speaking from a place of establishedness.

25:23-31 Abigail saves David from his (established?) wrath by speaking in a calming way, presenting herself humbly (disestablished?), offering food as though making up for a wrong (acknowledge the rightness of David's claim (intellectual establishedness of the proposition "David and his men deserve food).

25:38 God kills Nabal

26:9-10 The anointed one is not to be killed

26:19 Being (in a sense) politically disestablished (no longer having a place in the people of God) can cause you to be cut off from God?

This makes sense instrumentally, but maybe David thought he needed a place in Israel (in the people? in the land?) in order to serve God.

26:20 (Is the presence of God confined to a certain physical place, which David is not in at the time of the conversation?)

In any case, it's plausible that disestablishment (political, personal) can cause people to turn away from God.

26:23 David says that God rewards every man for his righteousness and faithfulness.

If this is literally true, it's so in a general sense, since the righteous are not rewarded literally every time. Even if they are rewarded in an afterlife, their experience on earth will be a mixture of the establishedness of just reward and the disestablishedness of lack of just reward or of positive injustice.

28:5 Saul is afraid (psychological disestablishedness)

28:6 He inquires of the LORD, but God does not answer at all.

28:7 So he seeks establishment from a medium, going against God's commands.

28:19 Israel must be defeated so that Saul can be? The people and the king must go together?

29:6 David is regretfully informed that, despite his good conduct, he can't be included in the established activity of his adopted(?) people, going up in battle against God's people (his own). Belonging can be a bad thing / establishment can turn a small, disestablished friend of God into an enemy of God.

(Perhaps God would have been understanding in this case, but it is still unfortunate when God's people fight against each other.)

30:6 David "strengthened himself in the LORD his God" David was able to strengthen himself in the LORD because the LORD was his God? David held him to be God? And God found David trustworthy because of that? Contrast with Saul in 28:5-7

30:7-8 David inquires of God answers.

30:16 The Amalekites are in some sense psychologically established,

because they celebrate their wealth, but are politically disestablished due to their heedless celebration.

30:25 David establishes a rule / statute. An established person can establish a law, and a law is a kind of political wealth, an impersonal ruler or establishment.

Ch. 31 confirmation that Saul's downfall led to Israel being disestablished (fled, leaving cities to Philistines)

2 Samuel 1:1-16 David orders the execution of the Amalekite who killed "the LORD's anointed".

1:20 The disestablishing of one body of people yields establishing to another.

2:1 David inquires and God answers.

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Where does the norm of honoring and protecting the LORD's anointed come from? Quick re-read of 1 Samuel 10 does not show an estblishment of "don't dishonor / harm the LORD's anointed" Maybe it's somewhere else? It may not have been handed down by God, but rather be David's idea -- a wise precedent and norm for a future king to establish. If the establishment (the person who establishes and (in some sense) embodies the body politic) is respected and protected, it strengthens and protects the body politic.

(On the other hand, Solomon is the one who would do things because they were wise, more so than David, who would do things because they were right. Deontological ethics (my perception) is a bit hard to reason about, because it relies so much on "X, Y, Z just are right", a lot more bedrocks. But if David had a principle behind "honor the LORD's chosen one" what would it be? Maybe that God chose Saul and preferred for him to be king (despite that God may have / apparently regretted doing that, and Saul got the future of his kingship taken away from him). I think it makes most sense (to me) to say David's honor of Saul was for the office, and from that for Saul, rather than for Saul in who he actually was. Not sure where to go with this thought from here.)

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3:14-16 David gets what was "his". He remembered fighting for Michal. (The memory of an unpaid debt or wrong, that claim on reality, is psychologically establishing, is something that can be leaned on). David, having established himself by getting what was "his", deprives someone else of what was "his". For David to be more established was for Paltiel to be less established.

3:18 Establishedness also comes from the words that God said.

3:39 What is the tonality of Israel's establishedness? David, as establishment, is merciful, while Joab and Abishai, as parts of Israel's establishedness, are severe. David leaves the repayment of the evildoers (Joab and Abishai) to God. For David, the establishment is insufficient, incomplete. But God fills in the insufficiency (so he seems to expect).

4:10 David once again kills people who killed his enemy.

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Perhaps from David's conduct we see the mixedness of victory?

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5:8 Some kind of saying (a precedent?) is established through the establishedness of David.

5:9 David establishes Jerusalem as his (in our day, because of that, it is a disputed city)

5:10 God affirms mixed people. (You could take that as "what wonderful grace to a mixed person like me" and as "there is something genuinely messed up -- not just formally considered sinful -- with the Godly establishment on earth" (as though God has chosen the best people (on whatever metric he considers best) and these are it?). But the messed-up-ness of someone like David shouldn't produce disrespect or simplistic anger, because those are even more messed-up than him.

5:12 David was established and exalted for the sake of Israel.

5:19 David inquires of God and he answers.

5:20 And gives them to be defeated by David.

5:23-25 Same as in 19-20.

6:2 God is (symbolically?) enthroned in the ark. (A symbol of how he is ultimately the establishment of Israel.)

6:6-7 Uzzah tries to save the ark (protect God?) but disobeys God in the process. God is angry and kills Uzzah.

Does this mean God cannot be benefited at all? Or that which makes up his well-being can't be benefited by human initiative? Our well-being is part of his well-being. But God himself can't be killed by anything outside himself. He will be okay in the end, no matter how bad things get for him now. We have to respect him in who he is (part of making him holy) -- which is a kind of establishment over us. (That God is a certain way and the nature of God is the nature of establishedness.) We can rest in his establishedness and therefore respect him.

God lets us violate his holiness whenever we sin, but he made the ark a teaching point to teach his people to respect him (Is this ego-respect God wants, or survival-respect? I think the latter, or an analog to the latter given that survival is not literally a concern for God)

To respect something is to leave it as it is, whatever state of establishedness or disestablishedness it is. Being is an established thing, so all things that are are established in some way. To disrespect is to disestablish. To disrespect is good (or has a good outcome) when it opposes bad establishedness. (Or maybe disrespect is always bad, bad for the disrespecter? In that case maybe there's a respect for the highest someone can be and that they be the highest which can motivate disestablishing moves.

As long as bad establishedness exists, there is occasion for (some kind of) disestablishedness.

(Probably more to be said (that ought to be said? that will be said?) about this incident.)

2 Samuel 6:16, 20-23 Michal despises David, and then says (what she really thinks? or some kind of useful thing to say to undermine David?) that she objects to him dishonoring himself before the female servants (risking disestablishment?)

David doesn't buy what Michal is trying to say about looking bad to the female servants. David is okay with looking uncool, heedless, or perhaps in other ways vulnerable to disrespect, for the sake of love for God, and done out of trust in God. God chose (established) David, the trusting, wholehearted one, over Saul, the untrusting, "doublehearted"/ doubleminded one.

7:6 God never asked for an (established?) house, only (disestablished?) tents. But (vs. 13) he will allow David's son to build a house.

Humans like to build established temples to their gods, but God doesn't care (or maybe prefers for there to not be such a symbol of establishedness attached to him). God may prefer us to have less of a sense of security and sufficiency, and more of radical trust / dependence, and longing for him.

(If I had more time I would look into the psalms of David to see how establishedness/disestablishedness plays out there. I think that radical trust, dependence, and longing for God might be found there. Psalms often seem to need disestablishedness to write and to understand firsthand.)

7:10 God promises to end the cycle of violent people taking over Israel, as in the days of the judges. Why? Why did he permit the "mini-Captivities" of the judges days in the first place? Maybe he thought they would work to teach people to love and trust him (this seems to have been an effect). But

now he wasn't going to use that strategy, and instead give them (relative) peace and security. Was this because it was what his people insisted on (by calling for a king in 1 Samuel), and once people insist on something, God has to work with it in order to be trusted? (If we define "God" (or even "worthy leader") as "that person which is (most) trustworthy", and if God wants us to trust him, we won't see him as being trustworthy if he is too far outside our "Overton window", so it is more beneficial to him, and us, in pursuing his interests, to "play along with us", if we really have insisted that our relationship with him be based in a definition of trustworthiness we insist on. A child is not ready for the cross (or cross-like discipline, as in Judges).

Was it instead the case that God realized that the people were right, and the horrible days of the Judges era weren't actually conducive to people loving and trusting God? It's true that suffering does not necessarily cause us to turn to God. If we hate suffering so much that we refuse to find any redeeming value in it, we will refuse to turn to God from it, and then it will have no practical value to God, and he will have no reason to keep it around. Can there be a replacement for suffering in the process of making people holy? Maybe? Statistically, which is more holiness-producing, a world of people who "fear God" (in the biblical sense) and suffer, or one in which they don't fear God and don't suffer? I would guess the former. Rates of hardening would be lower in the former. Rates of deep trust, love, and loyalty to God would be greater in the former, and lower in the latter. (Maybe disestablishedness is more the root of the good of suffering, and non-suffering disestablishedness can substitute for suffering?)

7:12-16 Messianic / Christian-sounding language (reading this through Christian eyes). God is promising a permanent establishment. The Messiah comes through the line of David (one who loves and trusts God wholeheartedly and not doublemindedly?) and not Saul (a half-faithful Israelite) or a pagan ruler (Nebuchadnezzar? Augustus?)

To what extent is God ultimately committed to establishedness of some sort? God's rest is established (completely stable social order), and that is the necessary end of existence. That which is legitimate will last forever, but by definition, what is illegitimate must someday be rejected by Legitimacy.

Disestablishedness becomes an inherently bad thing when legitimacy and establishedness are identical. The question becomes, what is the true nature of legitimacy and thus legitimate establishedness? Jesus, who goes to the cross, gives us an idea. But here in 2 Samuel 7, maybe we would look at permanent establishment like David might have, with the awe of permanent establishedness and not the horror and brokenness worked into it on some level, when we get specific about what it really is (something requiring the cross).

7:18-29 David does not feel worthy of having been permanently established and thinks God is big, a doer of "great and awesome" things (vs. 23) (And I'd agree that they are great and awesome things, but I don't think "greatness" and "awesomeness" are better than love. God is other than "greatness" and "awesomeness", and they serve him.)

8:1-14 David establishes Israel by defeating neighbors and God gives him victory.

David dedicated silver and gold from "all the nations he subdued" (vs. 11) to God. (Silver and gold he coerced from them?) Is it right to dedicate silver and gold taken from ungodly people? Is this honoring to God? Establishedness justifies behaviors (in the eyes of the established one; maybe, or maybe not, in reality) which are wrong if we don't assume that the established one is legitimately established.

Ch. 9 Out of David's establishedness, he establishes Mephibosheth.

10:11-32 "Be of good courage, and may the LORD do what seems good to him." An establishedness out of one's own strength ("be of good courage?") and based in trust ("may the LORD do what seems good to him")?

11:11 Uriah refuses establishedness if God and the people of Israel are not established (the establishedness of comfort, rest, and satisfaction of hungers).

11:16 Because David is established, and Joab established under him, Joab obeys, and Uriah obeys.

If you're established enough, you get your way even if it's bad. Some level of establishedness is needed for moral agency / moral self-expression.

12:7 David's establishment (his future) is modified such that now a note of disestablishment (bloodshed and adultery, vss. 10-12) will enter the royal family. Vs. 10's "the sword shall never depart from your house" happens to describe Jesus' life and sort of describes Church history.

The sin of a king curses those under him.

12:9, 14 David scorned / despised God and his word. David hated and disrespected God, whom he otherwise honored and loved, and God was willing to partially disestablish him, with likely (later on proved actual) consequences for the kingdom.

12:20 David, brought low (in some sense disestablished), turns to God, like Israel in Judges 10:15.

12:31 Establishedness leads to the servitude of the people adjacent to the establishedness.

13:28 Absalom establishes his servants so that they murder his brother.

13:3-5, 32-33 Jonadab establishes a plan (which carries Amnon through when he wouldn't or couldn't otherwise), and is, overall, a crafty disestablisher (maybe angling to break down David's house for his own political ends?) Jonadab was an agent of God (presumably), a good disestablisher, but Jonadab was in himself a bad disestablisher, and generally, bad disestablishers are to be opposed, just like bad establishers and establishments.

2 Samuel 14:4-11 David, as establishment, establishes a law (a precedent)

14:12-13 David is bound by his own precedent. This only makes sense insofar as his precedent recognized a higher law.

Is God bound by his own law? (On some level yes? So he had to go to the cross?)

15:2-6 Because of some kind of opening (disestablishedness) in David's government, Absalom is able to establish himself politically, which takes away from David's establishment. Having the hearts of people establishes politically. (So where your heart goes, that you establish?) Whatever you consider your rightful authority tends to elicit your love (by way of your loyalty)?)

16:16-19 In disestablished times, it can seem like all kinds of things can be true.

17:14 God intervenes.

17:15 Hushai thinks fast, has a plan made up quickly. Competence (establishedness) enables righting wrong (establishing)

Trust vs. competence, one proceeds from disestablishedness, and often is disestablished, the other proceeds from establishedness.

19:1-8 Mourning can't completely outweigh the fact that someone you lost due to their evil was evil. The people who are saved from the death of an evil person are also valuable. (And, that evil is less, or all gone, is also valuable.) Because David's story has not ended, he can't mourn forever (he can't bear witness to the truth of what he lost, the person who was lost), but has to "sit in the gate".

19:22-23 David's establishedness enables him to not kill / to pardon.

21:1 David seeks God and God tells him the famine he sent is over the bloodguilt of Saul.

21:14 After David has seven sons of Saul hanged to atone for the bloodguilt, God "responds to the plea for the land".

22:2-4 David finds establishedness in God.

22:7 David calls on God from a disestablished place.

22:28 David sees God as one who establishes the disestablished, and disestablishes the established.

22:42 David makes it sound like the enemies of him cried to the LORD.

If true, then God has to not listen to the cries of one disestablished party in order to heed the cries of another.

23:3-4 Legitimate, efficacious establishment, under "the fear of God" (disestablished in itself before God, but established in its respect of and obedience to God), blesses the land.

23:10,12 God brings victory through mighty men.

Ch. 24 This is a weird passage, esp. vs. 1. Vs. 1 is hard to make sense of since it sort of looks like God is the author of sin. 1 Chronicles 21:1, a parallel text, says that Satan incites David. Maybe Satan used God to incite David, sort of like in Job? But then, in 2 Samuel 24:1, it says that God was angry, and incited. Could Satan make God angry at Israel? Point out some sin (as Accuser) that God would otherwise overlook? This seems to give Satan a lot of power over God. Is God less-established than in say, a classical-theism-leaning reading of the Bible? (Which might be the reading which is most in favor of establishedness and sees God as most established). (Could God be the author of sin? If that's so, how can we trust him? Less so than if he couldn't be, so he would be less-established.) Or is it the case that 2 Samuel 24:1 is wrong, and should be superseded by 1 Chronicles 21:1, which makes more sense theologically? In that case, the Bible itself is not perfectly established.

And yet we trust God, and/or the Bible, anyway, even though they may have some weakness or contradiction of what we might naively consider perfect establishedness.

(I suspect that there is at least one classical-theism-leaning / max-establishedness interpretation of 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1 which preserves or attempts to preserve a view that God and the Bible are perfectly established. It may be that I would grant them ~1 credence if I read them (or find it the case that if I added up all their credences it would come to ~1, crowding out the disestablishedness here), but if they were merely plausible, they wouldn't take away all my uncertainty about the establishedness of the Bible, which is itself a disestablishedness.)

I don't think that disestablishedness kills Biblical Christianity, because it's a special case of the Problem of Evil, and no matter how messed-up the world is, we still trust God anyway (if we are Christians), even if we can't explain how God could be both good and perfectly in-control given the worst of the evils we see. If (like me) we simply relax the expectation that

God be perfectly in-control, then how can we trust reality? Well, for myself, I don't think about it, but I find that I mostly just do. The Bible only has to be significantly ("quantitatively") or specially ("qualitatively") trustworthy to be worth following.

We do trust disestablishedness, and, at least given this discussion (about 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1), in some sense disestablishedness is trustworthy, since the best path, even if imperfect, is the one we ought to trust.

2 Samuel 24:2-3 David orders a census -- this is something he's not supposed to do. Why would he order a census? Presumably to know his strength. To know how established you are establishes you. God would consider this bad if it meant David wasn't trusting him.

2 Samuel 24:10 David's conscience disestablishes him and he asks God to take away his sin (a kind of re-establishing).

2 Samuel 24:11-13 God offers David a way to pay for his sin.

2 Samuel 24:14 David trusts God's untrustworthiness more than man's untrustworthiness (Untrustworthy in the sense that, generally, a pestilence is something you should avoid, and which bad people are the kind of people to do to you.)

2 Samuel 24:25 David completes his repentance (presumably), and God responds.

1 Kings ch. 1

Someone has to be king, and David isn't filling the role (the nation calls for its own establishment), so Adonijah takes the initiative. Then David has to establish Solomon. The disestablishedness of Adonijah's attempt at succession (ungrounded in the will of David), called for the establishing of Solomon.

1 Kings 2:3-4 According to David, Solomon is to keep God's law, which will bring prosperity (establishedness) and future for the line of David (establishedness).

2:5-9 David establishes enmities and friendships of his into Solomon.

2:13-25 Solomon (has to) defend his establishment, and has his half-brother killed.

2:43 The name of the LORD (token of establishment) is used as part of Solomon's establishing conditions on Shimei, which technically gave him the option to live, but which made it harder for him. The established one (king) can set up the conditions within which his subject's free will can operate.

2:46 "So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon."

1 Kings 3:1 Solomon marries a daughter of Pharaoh. (Presumably to establish Israel?)

3:7-9 Solomon is lacking (disestablished), realizes it, and asks for a power / virtue, in order to be established, for the sake of the establishment of Israel. (In order to establish Israel, their establishment must be established.)

3:10-12 This pleases God and he gives Solomon wisdom and discernment.

3:28 Israel is in awe of Solomon's wisdom.

Awe involves psychological disestablishedness (psychological establishedness may accompany it?). When individual people are in awe (disestablished), it establishes the awe-inspiring one (or tends to, if the awe-inspiring one is a person). The king (establishment) becomes stronger, which strengthens (establishes) the nation as a whole.

Collectives might "like" (select for) cultural currents that disestablish individuals in favor of the collective's establishedness.

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Which is worse, to rely on yourself rather than on God, or to rely, not on yourself, but on a collective, rather than on God? (This may be a trick question.)

--

4:1-19 Solomon sets up officials.

4:19 "and there was one governor who was over the land" Presumably, an effective central authority, uniting all the different sub-powers, which inherently have their own initiative and could break out to try to take over the rest? Subordinating powers to the whole -- liberal? monarchical?, either way, established, the mark of a strong, effective, uniting government.

4:20 Prosperity and hedonic value followed Solomon's establishing.

4:21 Solomon's establishedness enables him to rule over neighboring kingdoms and get tribute.

4:25 Israel lives in safety under Solomon.

5:3 When the land is at rest (established), you can build a temple to God.

Optimistically, good temple-building can serve as an anti-temptation to ameliorate the spiritual dangers of establishedness.

Secular "temple-building" might be exemplified by the proliferation of art

and games in our time, or especially as presented by transhumanists with regard to the far future (in *X-Risk*) or also what could be called "advanced experience", also in *X-Risk* but also in "Letter From Utopia".

5:13 Solomon drafts forced labor out of Israel. (A good thing, to build the house of God? But God didn't even want a house, originally. Which would God rather have, for his people to be free, or for them to have more-established symbol of his establishment over them? Or should the temple be seen as a way to honor God? Which would he prefer, to be honored, or for his people to be free? Perhaps God values being honored for the spiritual benefit being given those honoring?

An overall question: to what extent is Solomon a return to Egypt?

I'm not sure what to think of the temple -- it is somewhat ambiguous and mixed to me.

6:11-13 As Solomon builds the temple, God states that "concerning the temple" (Solomon's physical establishing), Solomon should also build a legal / loyal / obedient temple (a spiritual / psychological / fiducial establishing).

7:1-12 Solomon builds a palace for himself, maybe using forced labor, certainly using a lot of resources. Perhaps this can be partially justified by his need to imporess the people in order to be their establishment?

(The tricky thing about unjust financial decisions is that they are often partially justified.)

8:1-11 Whatever God thought of the temple, he gave signs of blessing.

8:22-53 Religious activities that were previously unrelated to any temple are now related to the temple.

People wanted a place to worship (were going to "high places" (3:3)), so here was a way to give them a place of awe in a city.

Was "wild" religion (a military commander using Urim and Thummim in the field? Or simply inquiring of God? Or a farmer inquiring of God?) devalued by there now being a temple, an "official" place to be religious?

8:58 Solomon prays for anti-temptation.

8:61 Solomon wants people's hearts to be fully true to God.

9:1-9 Being established by God is conditional on being true to him in a sustained way.

9:15 Solomon did use forced labor to build his house.

10:1 The queen of Sheba connects Solomon to the name (reputation?) of the LORD.

10:9 The queen of Sheba blesses the LORD, having been blown away (because of being blown away?) by how wise and wealthy he made Solomon.

Humans are impressed by that kind of thing, and therefore it is a mechanism to cause them to find God trustworthy. Wealth is attractive, to whatever culture goes with it, whether that culture is ultimately trustworthy or not. (Westernness (as in the SSC post How The West Was Won) establishing itself globally).

Are there other ways to draw people to God, particularly when they start out, far from any peculiarly Biblical values?

10:14 Possible source of the 666 in Revelation 13:18? "666" only appears in connection with Solomon and Adonikam. Adonikam had 666 sons / descendants (in Ezra 2:13) and 667 (in Nehemiah 7:18). Little is said about Adonikam (just a name in lists of names). So Solomon is the only OT figure who could be used in an interesting way by the author of Revelation. But it still might be a coincidence. "666" could come from a different source (numerology of someone's name?). But there's some likelihood that there is a connection (not safe to completely rule it out).

The passage in Revelation does not make perfect sense if you think that 666 only applies to Solomon, but it is interesting to see that the second beast (Revelation 13:11) has "two horns like a lamb" -- perhaps it is a false Christ, or a personification of the church to the extent that it really furthers the values of the first beast (who is blatantly against God (vs. 6))

It does make some sense to wonder if the church could be an enemy (or false friend) of God in the way that Solomon ended up being. Revelation is a book concerned with corruption of the church.

1 Kings 11:1-8 What most directly turns Solomon away from God is his many foreign wives. Solomon somehow has time to have 700 wives and 300 concubines. He isn't the enemy of neighboring countries, but instead intermarries -- a peaceful, integrating thing to do. This creates a bad establishedness.

11:9-11 God is angry at Solomon for being spiritually unfaithful to him.

God blessed Solomon richly, but still he turned away. The riches were not enough to secure his loyalty and actually (may have) hindered it (certainly the state of rest that the land could be connected with his many foreign wives).

11:14-41 So the cycle continues, to some extent, with a promised civil war.

Labels: #book-length, #civilization, #establishedness, #God, #J. R. R. Tolkien, #life choices, #love, #ontology, #politics, #psychology, #suffering God, #trust, #Ursula K. LeGuin

(Short version of) Establishedness and Loving God

%short-version-of-establishedness-and

Friday, September 17, 2021

I wrote a longer version of this, which explains all of this more fully. I thought it was good to offer something shorter and more concise, so I wrote this.

These posts were responding to the question "How could it be a good thing for there not to be a king?", occasioned by a Twitter conversation about the last verse in Judges, and how a libertarian found the kinglessness described there to be good, while my non-libertarian interlocutor did not.

What I did after the exchange was attempt to write up my reactions to that question and the exchange off the top of my head. It took me a couple of days and was long. (The later part of the post is mostly concerned with "establishedness", as will be explained below, but in this initial part I considered other topics as well, like comparing the value of a "hands-off" legislative king rather than a "hands-on" direct-ruling king.) This first reaction part fairly directly relates to the original conversation.

Then I realized that the subject (God, kingship, judgeship) demanded that I read the Bible to see if what I thought off the top of my head could be supported with the Bible. So I read Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and the first 11 chapters of 1 Kings (the reign of Solomon). I wanted to see what the Bible said about disestablishedness (Judges) and establishedness (Solomon) and the period in between (1 and 2 Samuel). I was trying to understand why God might have preferred the Judges days, and I thought that establishedness might be a big part of the answer. (Establishedness being something connecting to psychology, politics, and ontology, which could all be foundations of a person's spirituality.)

"Establishedness" as I use it is "how things are put together, that they are a thing, their fullness and wealth, certainty and settledness, stability, order" and similar things. "Disestablishedness" is "hunger, lack, longing, poverty, confusion, incompleteness, being ostracized, questioning, striving" and similar things.

(Looking back, I see that the real issue at stake between me and my interlocutor in our original conversation probably wasn't literal earthly

kingship, but rather something king-like or something judge-like in non-monarchical (liberal democratic?) government, or in the valueset associated with kingship or judgeship as found in culture, even culture far away from government itself. I would say now that maybe the difference between "king" values and "judge" values is "more establishedness" and "less establishedness", respectively.)

I found that I could make a case for establishedness and disestablishedness each being "mixed" things (things which call for ambivalence), and that disestablishedness of some sort is needed to break bad establishedness. Bad establishedness leads to spiritual unfaithfulness and spiritual deadness. Disestablishedness gives an opportunity for people to cry out to God, and for him to answer by establishing them. So God could have preferred an experiential environment for his people that was less-established (that of the judges as opposed to the kings), so that they would love and trust him more, and not commit themselves to idols. I read the Bible readings I set myself to read, and as I wrote my notes on the Bible reading, various ideas occurred to me, related to establishedness (how it relates to psychology, social relationships, politics, the church, current events, and other areas), which I wrote down. (I also added a few notes during the time I spent editing these posts.) Some of those ideas were concerned with how disestablishedness could be good in itself, apart from any role as disestablisher of bad establishedness.

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My concerns -- somewhat going into this, and somewhat as they have developed as I've written -- have to do with whether or not people really love and trust God, and avoid idols (or cease attachments to them). (In general, with whether they adopt holiness in general (being set apart to God).) While I have unusual beliefs about the Bible which intensify this concern, I think anyone who values evangelism, and/or who cares about the long-term future of the church, should be concerned with whether people love and trust God fully, and avoid or cease attachment to all idols, and with their holiness in general. For me, it is a direct matter of salvation, whereas for other Christians, it's a step or two upstream of salvation (evangelism is only effective if someone cares enough to evangelize, can image a genuine love and trusting of God, and also through that can minimize the sins that poison an unbeliever's trust of Christianity).

I am concerned that in the future, civilization will someday be able to give humans what they want, and what humans want will not involve notable amounts of disestablishedness, and so people will not have the opportunity to truly love and trust God. So Christians should value disestablishedness to some extent, and thus can agree with God that it is part of a good experiential environment for humans. Disestablishedness can be good in itself (trust requires or is disestablishedness) and even some bad disestablishedness can be better than bad establishedness. Fallen

establishedness (what libertarians fear?) is particularly dangerous when it becomes absolute. We know to be concerned about this in the case of dystopia, but it is also the case with utopia. Even a modest government is dangerous, if it becomes part of an overall social order which does not actually point people toward God.

I am concerned that the values of Christians do not diverge significantly enough from secular utopia to really value God and genuine love and trust of God. To me, it seems like we value a nice life on earth more than we do God. God is a means to a nice life on earth. We don't value love apart from its role in getting us nice lives. We want our preferences satisfied and our experiences to be experiences of well-being, which is the same thing that secular civilization wants and works for. When civilization figures out how to give us nice lives, we'll take civilization's version, as we are already doing, to the glory (the finding-trustworthy-of) civilization. We need to find a way to love God for himself, so that there can be no substitutes.

Hedonism and preferentialism seek psychological establishedness. To say "no" to them is a motion of self-disestablishing. This requires that we be willing to de-value establishedness as our highest good, and admit that there is such a thing as good disestablishedness.

Establishedness can make a tempting substitute for God. Also, the church can be tempted by love of establishedness to become the worst kind of chosen people. Love of establishedness is a spiritual danger on multiple fronts (from secular pressures and from within the church).

It's true that civilization (globally speaking) will only get less established in the next decades due to climate change, but AI could change that trajectory somewhat. Optimistically, with respect to this potential spiritual problem, the near-term disestablishedness of the world gives time to prepare and reshape our values to be radically theistic, rather than radically humanistic with belief in God added on. (To value loving and trusting God, more than we do physical or emotional well-being, for instance, and to avoid idols.) The church can listen to the message and internalize it, and Christian thinkers may be able to find a way to articulate it so that non-Christians see that there is a real risk involved to spiritual decay, so that they put safeguards into civilization against it, even if they do not convert to Christianity or theism. An optimistic scenario for AI (for both secular AI safety people, I would assume, as well as for theistic-minded people) is that it remains under the control of humans and obeys human values as conveyed to it through a political process. So to the extent that this process will be democratic, the more people who have radically theistic values, the more likely that good disestablishedness, and good establishedness, are protected, and bad establishedness is opposed.

What this means for Christian humanism (humanists that are Christians, or Christians that are humanist) is that it needs to not forget that the point of

what it does is to connect people with God (this is real humanism given God and the possibility of not entering his rest). What I see on the Internet from Christians (and non-Christians) may be somewhat orthogonal to that goal (may overemphasize living a nice life on earth, and bringing about of desired behaviors in the here-and-now that may or may not lead people to love God). Everything interrelates, so there is a connection between any aspect of well-being (and any attempt to affect it) and whether people love and trust God. But understanding exactly what that connection is in each case is something that needs to be considered.

--

I ended up, much as I started, without firm preferences for specific types of government, seeing the debate over flavors of government as being not as important as resolving to make whichever one we choose be implemented such that it actually helped connect people to God (or was conducive to us helping that, given that it may not be best for the state to actually do the church's work). Ultimately, if I could do nothing else, highlighting the question implicit in that ("How does this discussion, program, vision, etc. actually connect to people coming to love and trust God fully?") would be a good outcome of these two posts.

Labels: #AI, #civilization, #climate change, #establishedness, #futurism, #God, #holiness, #politics

Actually Connect in Negative Times

%actually-connect-in-negative-times

Monday, September 20, 2021

I've heard it said that successful therapy involves the therapist as well as the client being changed. Maybe writing works similarly, so I should be changed by the process of me writing what I write.

One thing that I learned while writing the most recent major post, Establishedness and Loving God, is to remind myself to actually connect with God when I'm in negative situations, since it is easy enough to miss the opportunity.

Labels: #establishedness, #God, #note, #spiritual, #writing

Disestablishedness, Honesty, Politeness

%disestablishedness-honesty-politeness

Saturday, September 25, 2021

Psychological disestablishedness can lead a person to open up and say what they really mean, to reveal their true heart. Politeness is an establishedness.

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Honesty before God is a form of trust. Politeness is a lack of trust.

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We show respect out of politeness sometimes. If the only way to show respect is out of politeness, maybe we are being dishonest. While we may genuinely intend to show respect, which is respectful, we can only do so out of politeness, which is less than fully genuine. So then we have a dilemma: be dishonest and appear (and to some extent really be) respectful, or be honest and appear (and to some extent really be) disrespectful. There are different levels of disrespect, some more excusable than others, and honesty may outweigh some levels of disrespect, but not others.

Labels: #establishedness, #God, #note, #respect, #trust, #truth

Re: Empiricism is Silly as an Epistemic Basis, by APXHARD

%re-empiricism-is-silly-as-epistemic

Thursday, September 30, 2021

18 March 2022: fixed a broken link.

Here is another in my series of comments I decided not to leave on people's blogs, and instead wrote here as blog posts (see also Hero's Journey vs. Absurdism vs. Ancient Judaism). The post I would have replied to in this case is APXHARD's Empiricism is Silly as an Epistemic Basis (archived here).

I didn't post this one because it was too long (I thought) and also a little bit off-topic. But mainly too long.

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I like empiricism when it implies things like "everything that exists is consciousness because that's all we experience" and is broadened to include noetic perception (things we perceive by believing that they exist or are true, like memories or concepts) as well as sensory perception, since that's part of what we actually experience. The consequence of holding to this kind of empiricism (in my understanding of it) is an openness to something like Platonism (I can "noetically see" democracy or algebra for instance, just as I can "sensorily see" my laptop as I type this). From this point of view, empiricism is a good epistemological stance because experience is all there is to know.

But the version of empiricism you are talking about involves something like verification. Public, based in sense perception and not shared noetic perception.

At some level, experimentation and perception merge. If I want to "test" that the word "that" is written in this comment box as I type, I just look and it's there. I'm not sure that there's a more rigorous way to test that, and if there is, the basic component parts of that test have to be taken as "bedrock" at some point, have to just be perceived to be true. In that sense, we empirically prove $2 + 2 = 4$, just by seeing it to be true, just like we empirically prove any of the tenets of logic, or anything that really follows from deductive reasoning. We test that $2 + 2$ equals 4 to us, and very

consistently it does.

(Perception can be valid even if uncorroborated.)

I think that there may be such a thing as materialism bias, which gets us to prefer to see the physical world "out there" and ignore the things we see which are not "out there", but rather "in our heads". But really it's all perception, and there's a kind of continuity and unity to what can be known.

Having said that, some perceptions are more trustworthy than others, and materialism bias protects us from taking seriously some untrustworthy perceptions. I think our culture (parts of it) decided a long time ago to not listen to certain possibilities. Maybe if you don't believe in ghosts, they don't haunt you (whether that really means there are no ghosts or not, you don't know and perhaps don't care).

If you don't trust at all, you die. A definition I like for trust is "receptivity to enhancement". If you're not receptive at all, you don't breathe or see the world as a place to find food. Without constraints like death (or experiences as bad as death), we would be free to be as free in believing as we want, and as strict as we want. But there's a kind of deep reality that says "To have life, you need to not believe everything, and also, you have to trust something to have life."

I like looking at things through the lens of "everything is uncertain, so what do we do practically? How do we choose to see the world, given that uncertainty gives us degrees of freedom?" We choose "practical epistemologies" to help us make decisions. The one I like best is one of love / altruism, which says "believe in the world to the extent that, just in case it does exist, you do help the people / sentient beings it represents to you."

If it matters whether you regard something as trustworthy or not (in order to avoid harm or seek enhancement), enhancement (and harm) matter. Harm and enhancement occurring to others matter no more or less than such happening to you. So harm-minimization (or the maximization of some essential enhancement) then shapes how I see reality, how seriously I take skepticism, and how freely I believe things. There's some real risk to being too skeptical or closing off some aspect of reality, as well as a risk of being too credulous or letting ideas (or worse, other beings) take over my mind.

The endpoint for me, of these kinds of thoughts, is not materialist or physicalist. I believe in God both because there is a certain amount of evidence (following from, for instance, the idea that everything is consciousness), and because the consequences of not believing could include harm for God or for other beings whose well-being is affected by the fact (or, speaking uncertainly, the live possibility) that God exists. I

"practically believe" (through practical epistemology) that God exists, closing the gap between the evidence and whatever level of certainty is needed to live. This could be labeled "faith", but it's one that has the tonality of responsibility. It follows from being responsible for the world, rather than from letting go of responsibility for the world, or wanting to feel good in a practical, egoistic way.

I think empiricism is the only possible epistemic basis, but not the definition of "empiricism" you were talking about. (Everything we know about comes through our perceptions, and even our theories or deductions about reality we only know through noetic perception -- they are instruments for noetically perceiving the realities they talk about.) I think holding truth to a standard matters, but not divorced from how effective we are in helping.

Labels: #altruism, #epistemology, #God, #love, #trust

Dialogue of Peace

%dialogue-of-peace

Friday, October 1, 2021

In the marketplace:

BUYER: I hear such a clamor in the marketplace. One person wants me to buy fish, and another to buy fruit. Which should I buy?

VENDOR: You should buy whatever it is that will bring you life.

BUYER: You are not offering up your produce to me.

VENDOR: Alas, I know that turnips are only for those who know them.

BUYER: But if you won't talk me into buying turnips, what shall I buy? Fish? Or fruit? Or whatever else?

VENDOR: Often enough, I am in your position. Every vendor is a buyer sometimes.

BUYER: What do you do?

VENDOR: Truthfully, I think that we don't know what food really brings life.

BUYER: So what do you do?

VENDOR: I'm waiting for someone to come into the marketplace and say what really does bring life.

BUYER: But how will you hear that person over all the noise?

VENDOR: I will try to make everyone be quiet.

BUYER: But why should they be quiet? Don't they know that fruit or fish bring the most life?

VENDOR: You're right...

BUYER: Vendor, please sell me some turnips.

VENDOR: Life and truth are not found in them.

BUYER: You said it: life and truth are found in them.

BOTH: We both know they aren't the answer.

Labels: #desire, #establishedness, #parable, #trust, #truth

News: 8 October 2021

%news-8-october-2021

Friday, October 8, 2021

I released a big post (Establishedness and Loving God) and that has left me winded for a few weeks. (I have bipolar disorder so I tend to get energy in waves.) I've found myself more interested in social and political questions, as evinced by that post, which is not something I expected in January when I was looking forward to this year.

I've been working on a book on "the cross" and find myself in a slow place. I think it will take longer than expected, but perhaps this is good so that I have more time to gather data for it. I don't really know where to look but the ACX/SSC-sphere seems to keep providing unasked-for sources. (I do have a lot of sources already lined up to read for some chapters of the book.)

I looked back at old news posts and saw where I was announcing things. There's more going on now on my Twitter and Tumblr accounts than when I first announced them.

Labels: #news and meta

Romantic Sense of Kinship

%romantic-sense-of-kinship

Saturday, October 9, 2021

Originally written November 2020.

Romantic feelings claim different things. They may claim that someone ought not to be married to their spouse, and instead should be married ... to you... They may claim similar life-sculpting things, that you should run through an airport, or that you should find someone no matter what. It's possible that sometimes when these feelings tell you something so dramatic, they are saying something trustworthy, but a lot of the time, or most of the time, they are not. And the feeling itself is not the final guide, or shouldn't be.

[October 2021: Not sure I would endorse "not trustworthy most of the time" (can't quantify the situation that well). (The ones that suggest adultery or other sexual sin aren't trustworthy in that sin is in itself evil.) Certainly the feelings are often not as necessary to pursue as they vividly and obviously seem, or are not of as indubitable truth, and in that sense are untrustworthy. (A life reality that is less trustworthy than it seems is less trustworthy for seeming more trustworthy than it is.)]

[October 2021: God uses romantic feelings to accomplish goals -- as with Samson being caused to fall in love with a Philistine woman to bring about violence against them (Judges 14:1-4) -- or perhaps sometimes in less "mixed" ways. It's certainly conceivable that Satan can use romantic feelings as well. Hopefully there is a good way to process the fact of those feelings given both those possibilities.]

Romantic feelings [by themselves] don't have any good reason to know about the future or even about what should be, in the present. However, they generally can be taken as a sense. They could probably indicate a lot of different things. But one thing among them is, they can indicate that you have some kind of kinship with the person you're interested in. What you do with that fact of kinship may vary. You might pursue a romantic relationship, even to the point of marriage. You might pursue or continue a friendship. Or you might think of the person you're interested in as a kind of point of reference in making sense of yourself or other people like you. You might feel in some sense less alone in the world, to know that there's someone else like you.

Labels: #kinship, #life choices, #note, #trust

Building Trust in Natural Feelings of What to Pursue

%building-trust-in-natural-feelings-of

Sunday, October 10, 2021

In Romantic Sense of Kinship, I talked about romantic feelings and how they seem to call for action. But this question can be generalized. Other kinds of feelings can call for action. Which should we pursue?

Our natural feelings can be helpful guides to what is good to pursue if our nature has been tuned to be in line with God and reality. If we value what God values and have (consciously and subconsciously) an accurate map of reality and of our ability to act on that map, then we will have good desires and be in a position to act on them. Then we can trust our own intuitive senses of what is desirable to do.

If we have God's values (more or less), then we will be in kinship with him. If we find someone romantically attractive, it will likely be because we share kinship with them, and there's a good chance that their kinship with us will imply their kinship with God. A kinship with someone else that is along the road of values that inherently involve us being kin with God is a good pathway across which to connect, bond with, become loyal to, someone else. So then it is likely that if we sufficiently share God's values, there is a high probability that whomever we fall in love with is either God's particular choice for us, or one of a number of acceptable choices we could make. (This discussion also applies to other forms of friendship.)

With romance and friendship, a lot of the heavy lifting of figuring out if pursuits (pursuits of people) are worthwhile is done by just figuring out kinship. Finding kinship, shared values, is a big part of facing reality in that context. But what about work pursuits? There competence involves more than just fitting the values of the work pursuit with your own values and your own values with God's values.

One way to be competent is in the usual worldly way, and there's a lot to be said for diligently building up your competence in a worldly way. But sometimes you can be more competent by being guided by God, and also, it is very important for your spiritual life for you to love and trust God, and listen to God. Sometimes, your own salvation may be more important than whatever good you would have done for others, for all you know. So it could be best for you to pursue an altruistic method that has attunement with God baked into it.

If you become kin with God, then he can speak to you more richly. As you become kin with God, you develop sensitivities, memories, and understandings, through which God can speak to you. A pipe organ may have many small pipes, and many large ones, shaped in different ways to produce different sounds. If a pipe organ lacks the 32 foot or 16 foot pipes (the longest ones which produce the lowest notes), a piece of music might not be playable, one which relies on bass sounds. Or if it is played, it lacks the bass, and doesn't convey the composer's full intentions.

The better God can speak to you, the better you will become and be kin with him, and sometimes the better decisions you will naturally make in work and friendship.

So if we want to trust our feelings when they say to pursue something, we should become trustworthy, so that our natures are trustworthy. We do so by developing kinship and trust in God and by building competence (and kinship and trust with God can help build competence.)

Labels: #God, #intuition, #life choices, #listening, #psychology, #trust

Personal Responsibility and Anxiety in MSL

%personal-responsibility-and-anxiety-in

Monday, October 11, 2021

We value being responsible for ourselves, taking care of ourselves, self-care. This can make us anxious. If we try to have the maximal personal responsibility, we might feel like we have to be anxious, and maybe that really is what is required to be personally responsible to the maximum extent. How highly should we value being responsible for ourselves? Should it be an absolute that rules our lives?

The biblical position is that we should not be anxious, though we might try to take care of ourselves.

Matthew 6 (Jesus speaking):

> 24 "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You can't serve both God and Mammon. 25 Therefore I tell you, don't be anxious for your life: what you will eat, or what you will drink; nor yet for your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 See the birds of the sky, that they don't sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns. Your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you of much more value than they?
>
> 27 "Which of you by being anxious, can add one moment to his lifespan? 28 Why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They don't toil, neither do they spin, 29 yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today exists and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, won't he much more clothe you, you of little faith?
>
> 31 "Therefore don't be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?', 'What will we drink?' or, 'With what will we be clothed?' 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first

> God's Kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore don't be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Each day's own evil is sufficient.

Does the natural theology of MSLN also support this relaxation of anxiety? Certainly if I think egoistically, then if I love and trust God, all will be well with me in the end, and it's okay if I risk dying young. But if I think altruistically, I might think that it is important that I stay alive, so that I can help other people. There's a bit of a trick here, where "responsibility to help other people" could really just be "being fearful, self-centered, (self-protective), and not trusting God" masked in concern for others. But if this trick is not in operation, then there's something worth thinking about here. How can we trust God and not fear things, and still be around to help other people? Arguably, if I want to ensure maximum responsibility to altruism in myself, I should maintain a certain useful level of anxiety, to make absolutely sure I stick around to be able to do good.

How will they learn to trust God if we're dead? But then, how will they learn to trust God if we don't trust God?

The natural theology of MSLN (MSL) says that with only a few (or possibly no?) exceptions, everyone will be resurrected to the Millennium or a time like it. Whatever I could have said to you in this life, had I not died young, I could say to you in the next. But at the same time, the way this life turns out does matter. Maybe if you heard what I would have said when you were younger, in this life, it would have done you more good. In principle, the structures of civilization and/or the church can further people's holiness, and serve as prophylaxis to hardening. If you're part of that structure, maybe it is better for you to keep living.

However, sometimes soldiers are needed, in battles against Satan. A soldier can be needed to die young. That can be more effective in bringing people to love and trust God than trying to make sure no one from our country dies. You should only be a soldier if there is a real need for you to go to war, and you should only die if you have to. Your goal is to die well, and to die too soon or too late are equally a problem. You don't know what you're doing, but God is a good commander, and if you trust and obey him out of loyalty to him and his values, then he will put you to good use.

In this, personal responsibility ends up being more about being responsible to God than being responsible to the godless pursuit of survival.

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Being responsible for your own well-being, if pursued enough, makes you conservative in outlook. This conservatism makes you fail to do the good you could do, to follow the visions that you otherwise could have, to

recognize and follow a good leader, to be a good leader. So while it is easy to praise from a humanistic perspective, if everyone abides by it scrupulously, we're worse off as a whole, and some people suffer who don't have to otherwise, those who would have benefited from the fruits of visions. Unsurprisingly, being responsible for your own well-being can be a selfish act.

It may be that it is difficult to say exactly how self-caring a person should be. Some self-care is beneficial to the whole and serves God's interests, but some is not and does not. No matter how popular self-care may become, there needs to be some sense that it could be untrustworthy.

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Another dimension to consider: you would save the whole world, but yourself be lost. Or, you overestimate how necessary or beneficial you are to saving the world, while losing the person who is most under your control -- yourself. You need to come to love and trust God completely, and you should start that pursuit now. If, as someone who loves and trusts God, you feel led to be altruistic, so be it. You can still think altruistically, see your own salvation as simply being one part in the whole of all people who need it, but focus on yourself as the one most accessible to your care.

So in the end, true self-care requires that you not be anxious over your well-being. To be responsible for yourself requires that you trust God.

A certain amount of watchfulness (which is similar to anxiety) can be called for to keep on track toward loving and trusting God and serving him. There really are dangers, but you watch for them, rather than worrying about them. Trust God in your watchfulness.

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These loose threads say different things, but overall they agree that from a natural theological (MSL) perspective, you should trust God. Trusting God involves not being anxious about the godless concern for survival. So MSL's take on personal responsibility is close to or essentially the same as the Bible's.

Labels: #altruism, #civilization, #death, #God, #Jesus, #morality, #trust

Holiness and Untouchability

%holiness-and-untouchability

Tuesday, October 12, 2021

Holiness can mean "set apart" or "morally pure". Another dimension is "untouchable". Maybe the center of "holiness" is purity. There can be things so pure that they shouldn't be touched, and one could also imagine a purity so intense that it can't be touched. Or maybe rather than it being untouchable, it can't be mishandled. If you mishandle it, you die. Or you are simply unable to come close enough to mishandle it.

A woman (or a man) might be holy in the sense of "if you mishandle me, you should, or will, die", in that sense be untouchable. One could then think that God, the most holy, is unreachable, but that assumption isn't necessary. The thing to work with here is the proneness to mishandling. Those who learn to not mishandle generally do so by understanding the holy person, and understanding a holy person is a natural gateway into becoming holy yourself. (Perhaps it is necessary sometimes to become holy in order to understand a holy person.)

Labels: #God, #holiness, #note, #relationships

Why Love the Invisible?

%why-love-invisible

Tuesday, October 12, 2021

"How can you love the God that you can't see if you can't love the people you can see?"

"Why should you love the God you can't see if there are plenty of people to love that you can see?"

Labels: #God, #humanism, #love, #note, #social connection

Kingdom and Civilization

%kingdom-and-civilization

Wednesday, October 13, 2021

Originally written November 2020.

Epistemic status: provisional, particularly in my definition of "Kingdom".

The Kingdom (for a Christian), is the kingdom of heaven, the domain ruled by God according to his righteousness. The Kingdom exists in heaven, and to an extent on earth. It is as though each Christian is partly in heaven while they live on earth. So they bear the Kingdom with them. The Kingdom is made up of those who do the will of God. It is made up of its subjects.

Civilization is a process -- has no king. It is the sum of all the nations on earth. Civilization drifts, evolves. It grows and may not be able to stop growing. Civilization is the interaction of human desires, is the field for history.

In Weilian terms, civilization tends to be made up of her "gravity", and driven by it, while the Kingdom could be seen as made up of and driven by her "grace".

[October 2021: Kingdom's subjects (persons) vs. civilization's human desires, which happen to be bundled into what we label as "persons".]

[October 2021: Church as both civilization and Kingdom. It aspires to being part of the Kingdom and perhaps "forensically" is, but its mind and flesh can be the same as civilization, when it lets human desires (or their semi-impersonal interactions) rule it, rather than God.]

Labels: #Christianity, #civilization, #definition, #politics

Apolitical Identity

%apolitical-identity

Wednesday, October 13, 2021

Originally written October 2020.

[Note: when I use "humanism" and "theism" in this post, I mean the ethical position that favors humans and human interests (especially secular human interests) -- humanism -- and the ethical position that favors God and God's interests -- theism.]

In this presidential election, I have decided to not vote. Along with other abstinent life choices (celibate, vegetarian), I can add "apolitical".

[And in fact I did not vote in that election.]

As Orwellian as it may sound, abstinence is freedom. The freedom that comes from being apolitical is being able to be on everyone's side, or if not that, to refuse to be on the side of anyone who wants to come after someone else. In 2016, I voted for a third party candidate. But, because the third party candidates are coded "blue" or "red" to a large extent anyway, I set myself against the other half of the country. I would like to someday leave my default "blue" environment and be considered trustworthy by people in "red" environments. This might help some with the overall problem of polarization in America. I would like to be listened to by as many different kinds of Christians as possible, and "red" America has a lot of professing Christians.

Although I have always identified as a Christian, from around the age of 13 until perhaps a year or two ago, I was trying to move more into secular environments. If you eat secular food enough, you'll get secularism in your bloodstream. I catch myself being something other than Christian quite a bit. I've leaned conservative and liberal at various points in my life, and now I want to be neither conservative nor liberal, but instead simply Christian.

Some Christians (for instance, some Calvinists and Catholics, and perhaps others) want to have a particularly Christian way to order society, sometimes to work for Christian interests in the political system. It's possible that I could endorse a similar view. But I would have to do a study on what the Christian way to order society would be, and the Christian way to try to bring that about, if such a way even exists. This could take me years to bring to a reasonable state of completion, sufficient to cause me to feel like I had genuinely Christian political opinions, and not just secular opinions that I, a Christian, find appealing.

Other Christians, when trying to be Christian about politics, choose to be apolitical. In this way they can at least shed the identities of "Republican" (conservative humanist) or "Democrat" (liberal humanist), and perhaps highlight that they are theists, putting God's interests ahead of autonomous human interests as do the secular humanists. [Secular humanists put autonomous human interests before God's interests.]

Both Republicans (as Republicans) and Democrats (as Democrats) are secular humanists. Secular humanism is seen in how you trust, not just the words you say. So Christians in office, even people who ran trying to appeal to a Christian base, are not necessarily Christians in how they approach reality. You can carry the flag of Christ and act like you don't believe in God, not just by some kind of moral indiscretion, but in the way that you are fearful of things a faithful person wouldn't fear and the way you do not look for the deeper and better things a faithful person would look for. Being apolitical is a chance to get free from secular humanistic thinking and adopt a Christian-only worldview.

However, this apolitical stance comes at a cost, which is having less of a chance to intervene in public affairs. A truly apolitical person might have less of an influence in stopping something like the Third Reich. If Germany was to have some kind of party governing it, one which was successful, filling the role that the Nazi party took on [could/would take on] and thus blocking it from coming to power, it would be run by humanists, not by apolitical theists. And if the church sits by while secular interests dominate the public sphere, that may be worse for both theists and secular people. Currently, politics is all about humanism rather than theism, and maybe that's for the best, even in a Christian society. But the question of "what is human well-being?" is one that we haven't figured out as a society. Christians should be heard in that discussion.

We could say that Christians are more essentially interested in advancing the Kingdom of God. And humanists are more essentially interested in advancing civilization. [A definition of "Kingdom" and "civilization".] If you save your child from a speeding car, he or she will grow up a certain way and will probably spend more of his or her waking life furthering civilization (on the job) than in furthering the Kingdom. The love in your family feeds capitalism, resource extraction, technological and cultural development, and the geopolitical interests of the nation you live in. So even apolitical people are voting, just not in an election.

Politics is all about humanism, at least ostensibly. So I could try, as an apolitical person, to still try to further human well-being, to vote in civilization in various ways, while staying away from identifying with someone I am ultimately not: a warrior for a secular army. I can aspire to be someone whose existence and activities further the interests of both "blue" and "red" people, or people on either side of any other politicized divide, and most importantly, the interests of God.

Having said all this, I do hope that someday I will have gone through the study I mentioned above, of what is the truly Christian way to interact with civilization. If the result of that is that it seems right to vote (I am making political decisions that are really Christian, and I have "malice towards none" / I maintain my independence from political feuds), then I will.

[Implicitly, I'm not rejecting humanism entirely. I could say that humanism follows from theism. Being apolitical enables me to distance myself from some sociologically and psychologically compelling humanistic identities (Republican, Democrat, etc.) which commit me to a version of humanism that tends to exclude theism -- and which also has defects (polarization) in how it pursues even secular humanism.]

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[It's interesting to read this in October 2021. I don't find the question of polarization to be nearly as salient to me right now. I think that in an election year, like 2020, we are more political than in an off-year. Also maybe 2020 was a particularly vivid year in terms of protests.]

[Identities are partly about how you feel. If you don't find an identity relevant, can you hold it? Maybe not to as great an extent. If there's nothing at stake, can you hold an identity? This is an interesting question to ask of Christians. Do Christians feel like there is anything theistic that is greatly at stake? If so, then they might probably more often hold to the identity of "Christian" deeply and firmly. But if Christians are only concerned with secular concerns (are you healthy? will you live a long physical life on earth?) then they perhaps can't be Christians as deeply and firmly. I would say that not-holding-firmly is itself a threat that raises the stakes, because we are saved by making it 100% of the way to being in tune with God, including valuing what he values on some important level.]

[I haven't relinquished my political identity of apoliticalness, even in an off-year. At least, it's still on the books in terms of how my life is set up. As mentioned here, I chose not to vote in the California gubernatorial recall election in 2021. Identities are fresh when new but are paid for by work over time.]

[This could apply to the Christian identity. Though the feeling might dissipate somewhat, can you work faithfully in accordance with the feelings you used to have? I don't feel that to love apoliticalness is inherently necessary, but I do feel that to love Christianity in some proper form (insofar as doing so is necessary to fully loving God) is inherently necessary, and if I can't feel that way at times, in those times I should at least be open to the time in the past when they were fresh, as well as to the hoped-for near or far futures where they are fresh again. Remaining faithful in the desert is being open to the times of freshness.]

Labels: #Christianity, #civilization, #God, #hope, #humanism, #life choices, #personal, #politics

Legitimacy Can't Go Back on Itself

%legitimacy-cant-go-back-on-itself

Saturday, October 16, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional.

In MSLN Theodicy, the point is made that if legitimacy were to will something that was illegitimate, it would make it legitimate. A (quasi?-)Nietzschean response might be to say that a truly *great* and *life-affirming* legitimacy would will everything, make all that is illegitimate legitimate.

But what I meant was more like "legitimacy, either through its nature or what it decides, is what it is, and couldn't go back on that, because if it did, it would call what really was illegitimate (what it considered illegitimate) legitimate (which it isn't)."

There's somewhat of a debate over whether God can determine what the good is, or whether he is subject to it himself (or *they* are subject to it themselves, as legitimacy comprises more than one person). Is it part of God's nature that certain things be right or wrong? (Legitimacy must call certain things illegitimate, by legitimacy's nature.) That seems plausible to me. It's also plausible to me that God decides what is right, and once the decision is made, it's irrevocable, even by him. So sometimes he decides what it should be by his will (something like divine command theory?) but after that, he's subject to it as much as anyone. God obeys himself.

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God can command us not to do things that aren't really sins at root. But if he has commanded us, we shouldn't go against his commands. If we do, we sin, because our disobedience (our turning from his voice) is the sin. To an extent, God could (and from the Bible, seemingly did) make commands that are either arbitrary, or only made sense from an ancient perspective. (Or perhaps from the perspective of, "what beliefs cause a nation of God's people to flourish from the perspective of civilization?" / "what makes a viable tradition for human organisms in their environment?")

That we should have obeyed those commands then (or must obey arbitrary/historically-contingent ones of our own) might be up to God's free deciding. But that we should obey God, whatever that may cash out to, is not up to God's free deciding. That's fundamental to what goodness

(as definition) is. God is legitimacy itself, and for us to be legitimate, we must be in tune with God. God can ordain things to be temporarily morally necessary. But there may be (I would guess that there are) things which are permanently morally necessary, which are not up to God to change anymore.

Labels: #Christianity, #God, #listening, #morality, #note

Forgetting Past Sins and Excursions From Values

%forgetting-past-sins-and-excursions

Wednesday, October 20, 2021

If you commit a sin, then you might think you are a sinner. If you hold to that identity so assiduously that you keep on sinning because of it, that's a problem.

So we usually (partially or wholly) disown our past selves that sinned, say that we are a new person, which helps us avoid that trap.

There are two ways to commit a sin: to do something wrong, or to fail to do the thing you need to do. If you're worried about not doing the thing that you are supposed to do, you might watch out for things that bend your identity away from being the kind of person who would do them. But you may well find yourself intentionally or unintentionally doing something that moves your identity away from doing what you need to do.

If that happens, you might disown your past self that was not "a good worker" or "in tune with the truth" or whatever other identity enables you to do what needs to be done, just as you would disown your past self that committed some kind of infraction.

If you mess up or had a bad intention in the moment, then it's true that you were out of line with God's values. But what would really make you be out of line with God's values is if you stay there and never get back on track.

Labels: #God, #life choices, #morality, #psychology, #valuing, #what is a person?

Spiritual Calculus

%spiritual-calculus

Thursday, October 21, 2021

In MSLN, hardening is the chief danger. One meaning of "calculus" is "hardened deposits" -- a spiritual danger. The habits and loves we have for idols of whatever sort (or pick another analogous word if you think "love" is too sacred for what we feel for idols) are attachments that can compete, perhaps fatally, with our love for God. They accumulate, and may have to be forcibly removed, by us or by God, if they threaten our salvation. Perhaps they can be prevented with some kind of hygiene (like with calculus on teeth).

If you have something in your life in addition to God, it might not be bad for you. There are many things which are good other than God (in some sense of the word "good"). If they don't fatally compete with love of God, they are basically safe. But if those attachments are hardened (fixing to be irrevocably necessary to you), then they must someday be unhardened or removed.

But another meaning of "calculus" has to do with measuring rates of change and is considered below.

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The following paragraph contains a brief explanation of calculus, using position, velocity, and acceleration as examples. There are better/fuller explanations elsewhere if this isn't good enough.

In physics, we can measure a particle's position. Then, if the particle's position is changing, it has a velocity. The velocity is the rate of change of the position. If the velocity is changing, it is accelerating or decelerating (has a positive or negative, nonzero acceleration). The acceleration is the rate of change of velocity. We use the mathematical tools of calculus to calculate the derivative of position, and this gives us the velocity. This is the first-order derivative of position. Then we can take the derivative of velocity, the derivative of the derivative of position. This is the second-order derivative of position, acceleration. And we can go on to higher-order derivatives of position, like the rate of change of acceleration (third-order), or the rate of change of the rate of change of acceleration (fourth-order), and so on.

(Thinking spiritually:) You can think of yourself as traveling on a path toward full kinship with God, holiness, being in tune with him. You move closer and sometimes further from him. If your position ever reaches your

destination, then you are safe. But until then, if your velocity reaches 0 (you stop moving toward God), and never increases (it is never saved by acceleration), then you are lost.

The world judges people based on position. And it's right to do so. Position enables you to be trustworthy, and the world does not want betrayal. Untrustworthiness leads to unnecessary harm. But this can be deceptive. We forget that it's *velocity* that's really critical, and a further variable that may or may not be well captured by mathematics, one of "that-which-brings-things-to-completion" ("endurance"? "ultimation"?)

In your spiritual life, you will have position yelling at you to pay attention to it, but velocity may be quieter. Acceleration is even quieter, and the higher-order derivatives of acceleration quieter still. There are an infinite number of orders of derivatives of position possible to compute, and they get harder and harder to sense as you get away from position. But it's certainly useful to think about velocity and acceleration, and perhaps develop a sense for the derivative of acceleration.

If possible, try to remember that other people aren't just position, but are also velocity, and acceleration.

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The previous metaphor may seem to suppose that progress is linear. But that may not be realistic. Another metaphor: You may be moving toward or away from God in some kind of 3D space. Up until recently, you may have been traveling basically straight toward him (straight-ish but with some error, straight as far as you can see from a distance), but because you were off by some angle, you need to make a course correction as you get closer. Maybe you have to divert around an obstacle that blocks your path, and actually move away from God for a time in order to proceed down your path toward him. (It's dangerous to desire or be comfortable with any movement away from God, but that movement may be what your life ends up bringing you.) In this picture, progress can be a spiral or some wandering path. But that "endurance" or "ultimation" variable still matters. You could think of it like, its health and strength, and the direction its health and strength are headed, are like velocity, and acceleration (respectively) in the other example.

Labels: #God, #holiness, #math, #spiritual growth

Therapy and Holiness

%therapy-and-holiness

Saturday, October 30, 2021

Secular therapy (or even Christian therapy) doesn't always aim at bringing a person to a complete relationship with God. There's always a danger with any seeking of well-being apart from a relationship with God that it can be too successful and leave people in a bad establishedness that keeps them from seeking God. When we go through pain that is bad enough, it tempts us to think its alleviation is all that really matters. Psychic pain can do that. If a therapist is our society's sanctioned way to deal with psychic pain, and they are successful, then we might think that that fixing was all that mattered, and not seek God.

So therapy has dangers to it. But therapy's goals can align with those of holiness to some extent. For instance, if therapy is meant to address issues like past bitterness, it can help people forgive, which is good in God's eyes. Or if someone seeks to be free of dark triad traits, that intention is a case of having God's values, and therapy may be able to make evil have less of a hold on the client. Sinful habits are something of which we are healed as much as it's something we repent from. Perhaps therapy can give people space from their pain so that they can notice how their relationship with God is going, or that God exists.

Labels: #establishedness, #holiness, #mental health

Being Human can be Unfair for Others

%being-human-can-be-unfair-for-others

Thursday, November 11, 2021

We don't naturally connect with all people equally. Some people we take natural delight in, often because they are similar to us, or different in a refreshing way. But other people are not naturally appealing. So if we are being natural (human? honest?) we will be unfair to people, withholding full welcome from some while giving it to others. So in that respect, fairness and standardization (and the mechanization of social relationships?) go together.

Is it possible to have a better nature, and naturally connect with all people equally? Maybe. Some people may be born with that kind of nature, and maybe to some extent it can be cultivated. We might learn to delight in all people. Another approach is to be at peace toward all people.

Labels: #morality, #note, #social connection

Asking is Willing

%asking-is-willing

Friday, November 12, 2021

If you will that God makes you good, then asking to be made good (in the way that God can do for you) can be a way that you are good, in the way that is completely up to you.

Labels: #God, #morality, #note, #prayer

Being Aware of Satan Can be a Good Thing

%being-aware-of-satan-can-be-good-thing

Friday, November 12, 2021

Being aware of Satan can be a good thing. When you or someone else is going crazy, remembering that that can be a product of supernatural mischief -- the situation is a scam that stuns and distracts you, thus pulling you into it -- can reveal the fakeness of it and thus take the wind out of it. Or perhaps it is only possible to really believe in God if you believe in the supernatural world, and you can only believe in things if they're dangerous. Perhaps both reasons obtain.

Being too aware of Satan is like any obsessive thought -- itself the kind of thing Satan can use on you. But you might try to increase how often you are aware of the possibility that Satan exists and may be scamming you, if you haven't hit the point of being too aware.

It's good to remember that the existence of Satan necessarily implies the existence of God (even though the existence of God does not necessarily always imply the existence of Satan).

Labels: #God, #mental health, #note, #spiritual warfare

Vision, Ego, Seeing, Opinion

%vision-ego-seeing-opinion

Monday, November 15, 2021

Vision, ego, seeing, and opinion are all related. If someone has a lot of vision, that might be interpreted as ego. When you see something, when you really see it strongly, with who you are, that's an opinion. Being opinionated may be interpreted as ego. If you are intensely engaged with reality, that could be interpreted as ego.

What makes vision, seeing, and opinion "ego" might be some factor of how much your visions, your seeing, and your opinions are "about you", how self-serving they are. If you are pure in heart, then you can engage with reality intensely, have vision, see things, and have opinions, and make it really about the whole, rather than just your own interest.

Labels: #establishedness, #morality, #note

You Can't (Spiritually) Save Someone Without Them Understanding

%you-cant-spiritually-save-someone

Thursday, November 18, 2021

Sometimes the salvation of another person feels urgent, or if not urgent, then still necessary. You may feel like you have to act regardless of any other considerations, given how urgent or necessary the call for this salvation is. The act becomes a number one priority, shutting out all other voices.

This has a tendency to cause you to act forcefully. You have to ignore anything that gets in the way of you saving the other person, including how they feel about it, any other goods in their life, any other possible ways they might be saved or need to be saved. There are reasons why they may see things differently than you, but you have to ignore that, and if those reasons connect to what their life is naturally, their flesh (who they are naturally) may have "limbs" that you would try to amputate so that they survive.

Ideally, everyone would understand when someone else came to save them. But if the threat is urgent enough, you have to save someone whether they understand or not. Maybe they will understand and be grateful to you later. What's important right now is making sure they don't die.

If your perspective is that you're trying to save someone from physical death, yanking them out of the way of, say, a speeding car without them understanding why does make some sense. You will succeed in saving them from (that) physical death, even if they never understand what you did.

But if you're trying to save someone from spiritual death, you can't force people. They themselves, in an uncoerced way, have to choose to affirm God's values. The understanding itself (intellectual and in their hearts) is what causes them to be saved.

Labels: #death, #note, #respect, #social connection, #what is a person?

Will-Nature Ontology

%will-nature-ontology

Monday, November 22, 2021

I ran across a concept in *Trust of People, Words, and God* by Joseph Godfrey, (a concept which is original to him, it seems), called "will-nature ontology". I haven't read the book in a long time and probably am misremembering what I read about it. But my mismemory might be interesting. So I'll explain what the concept means to me now, and then go back and see what he said it meant.

My explanation: When you encounter an object, at first it's a blank slate and you can't interact with it. Maybe you see an old-fashioned tool and can't imagine what it's for. Or you meet a person but all you know is their name and face at first. Then, as you understand more of the properties of the object, or as you grasp intuitively more about the object (as when mentalizing a person), you develop desires toward interacting with the thing, and the confidence that you can (something like the concept of favor). It is as though the nature of the object you apprehend halfway (or sometimes completely?) causes you to act [to will]. Understanding things, getting to know them, forming an idea of them (whether accurate or trustworthy or not) gives you a kind of psychological power or fuel, opens up motivation, could halfway force you to commit [to them, or some other course of action]. Therefore seeking to understand things could be life-changing, or sometimes dangerous.

(There might be more that I could develop here, but in the interests of time, I'll just say that's what I think and see what Godfrey said.)

Godfrey (informed by *Trust of People, Words, and God*, Ch. 7, "Ontology: Two Models for Reliance Trust and I-Thou Trust" and "The Will-Nature Model" (pp. 222-225)): The will is the subject, not only as knower, but as will-er, doer, truster, etc. Nature is the way an object is, that which makes it capable of "being modified, used, and known" (p. 224). The will finds the environment (objects in it?) to be allied, opposed, or neutral, to its interests.

This is different from my version of the idea, but my version might mostly be an elaboration or set of instantiations of his.

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I like my misremembering, and wonder if that's a good strategy for coming up with new ideas. Maybe if I'm in a mood for adventure, and making the most of reality, I might try that deliberately.

Labels: #definition, #ontology, #psychology, #social connection, #trust

Doing the Biblical Thing

%doing-biblical-thing

Monday, November 22, 2021

There are times in life where we have to weigh which path to take; other times where we are preparing ourselves to be a certain way, so that we make the right split-second decision when it arises and there's no time to think (more, or less, aware that that's what we are doing). If we can be deliberate, we might think "What's the wise thing to do? The prudent? The morally correct one?" (The prudent person eats stew, but Esau sold his birthright for stew -- an unwise choice.) We might also think "How can I love God through what I do? How can I trust him? How can I be loyal to him?"

We can certainly make mistakes, and sometimes we can't know the right thing to do in advance. If we feel that we are risking doing the wrong thing, we may try to be risk-averse (choose the safest option). But we can also say "Even if I'm doing the wrong thing, at least I'm doing the biblical thing". (We can find some precedent in the Bible for some behavior, though that behavior might not measure up to worldly standards of good decision-making. Care should be taken that use of the Bible is well-implemented.) Not "doing the wrong thing" in a sinful way, but in an unwise way. Some people choose wisdom (worldly wisdom), while other people choose to be true to God (spiritual wisdom), through the Bible or whatever other valid source of information about what God wants.

Worldly wisdom may employ reason, and we can know things about God using reason, but according to one form of reason, we seek to do what is socially defensible and in line with human instincts, while according to the other we acknowledge God as he really is, as one who connects to all of life.

Labels: #Christianity, #life choices, #morality, #wisdom

Sarkar; Sarkar and Truth

%sarkar-sarkar-and-truth

Wednesday, November 24, 2021

In Hinduism, *sarkar* is (something like) how your pattern of behavior, vibe, feeling, "energy", and spirit are all one thing. If you make a physical movement, it affects the rest of your sarkar. Your feelings will affect your movements. Your feelings are movements, in a way. You are like a motor with interconnected parts moving in a rhythm. You have an inner rhythm which is interconnected with and between your consciousness and your body. (Again, this is approximately what Hinduism says. I may have bent it somewhat to my own purposes.)

It's hard to believe things that you can't work into your sarkar. It could be that we don't live according to our real beliefs, what we really see to be true according to our best seeing. That best seeing may be buried under a pile of how everyone around us patterns us, physically, with shared vibes, and so on. The human body, the brain, the physical mechanisms of the mind, can seemingly only be patterned in certain ways. Intellectual knowledge, the "seeing-that-a-belief-is-justified" (perhaps the ought-belief), might be unbelievable, "un-hold-able", untrustable, if it is not in line with the body in some way.

However, if we want to believe, in a more bodily way, something we see to be true (perhaps is-believe it), then we may have to retrain our sarkars so that they fit what we really believe to be true. We may have to do this against the headwind of how other people pattern us.

Another perspective (than saying what is intellectually true should pattern our sarkars) would be to say that the sarkar is what is right. The right sarkar is what is right, and intellectual beliefs must be chosen as to whether they fit the right sarkar.

How would you know which approach to take? Sarkar-truth or intellect-truth? Either one could be true, one might think. I can't be sure that this is the only meta-truth approach, but the one I tend to favor (the one I currently think best), is that of the epistemology of love / altruism, where we consider all the possibilities, and when there is uncertainty, try to trust and act according to the course of action or trusting which avoids the greatest harm. So if intellect-truth says that there is a threat, it should be taken seriously, and if sarkar-truth says (or "feels") that there is a threat, it should be taken seriously as well. Whatever threat matters most should be prioritized, but the threat that is of secondary importance should be taken into consideration as well.

Labels: #body, #epistemology, #Hinduism, #psychology, #what is a person?

Is Complete Trust in God Necessary for Salvation?

%is-complete-trust-in-god-necessary-for

Wednesday, November 24, 2021

Is complete trust in God necessary for salvation, according to MSLN?

I'm not sure I can come up with a categorical "yes", but I think I can get close to a "yes".

As I study the Bible, I may come up with a stronger case, but I can at least say that to the extent that a person believes in the Bible through MSLN, we can see Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount teaching that a person should not be anxious and should ask God for what they need (whether they objectively or only psychologically need it, I guess). Not being anxious is a form of trust, and asking for what you need is a form of trust. Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount with these words (Matthew 7:)

> 21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will tell me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, in your name cast out demons, and in your name do many mighty works?' 23 Then I will tell them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you who work iniquity.'
>
> 24 "Everyone therefore who hears these words of mine and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on a rock. 25 The rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it didn't fall, for it was founded on the rock. 26 Everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn't do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 The rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell -- and its fall was great."

I'm not sure all of the Sermon on the Mount's commands can be seen as absolute moral commands, or if some of them can be seen as practical advice that is upstream of obeying moral commands. However, some of the commands, like not being angry, and forgiving, do have language that suggests they are moral commands, related to whether you will be saved,

and so it is with anxiety (Matthew 6:)

> 24 "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You can't serve both God and Mammon. 25 Therefore I tell you, don't be anxious for your life: what you will eat, or what you will drink; nor yet for your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 See the birds of the sky, that they don't sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns. Your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you of much more value than they?
>
> 27 "Which of you by being anxious, can add one moment to his lifespan? 28 Why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They don't toil, neither do they spin, 29 yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today exists and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, won't he much more clothe you, you of little faith?
>
> 31 "Therefore don't be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?', 'What will we drink?' or, 'With what will we be clothed?' 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore don't be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Each day's own evil is sufficient.

Vss. 24 - 25 suggest that to be anxious is to serve Mammon -- maybe not an airtight inference, but I think strong enough to make us concerned that if we never stop being anxious, we will be kept out of heaven. We would be trusting uncertain things (being anxious) rather than trusting the certain person.

That may be enough to convince some people (it would be enough for me), but there may be other Bible passages that strengthen the case.

Also, for those who do not trust in the Bible as much, but only in the natural theological part of MSLN, what can be said philosophically?

It does seem odd to think of someone who refuses to cease being anxious entering God's rest. It may be "physically" (psychologically?) impossible for a personal being to be in communion with rest if they are anxious. It

sounds true by definition. It is as though we condemn ourselves to something like hell if we do not cease to be anxious. Not being anxious is a big part of trusting.

Can God rest if we don't rest? According to the metaphysical organism argument, God experiences exactly what we experience, so, no. That's a fairly airtight reason to think that anxiety must cease, and that if our will is what keeps it going, it must change or we must be destroyed.

Is it possible to sustainably exist in an environment forever if you don't fully trust it? I can think of multiple cases where I was in a social environment that wasn't feeding me (or wasn't feeding me "good food"), and I sort of died inside and had to escape. I needed my "food" from somewhere, and had to flee the sterility or the sickness to find it. I didn't trust my environment, because it wasn't offering me what I needed, or what I hungered for. A person in God's presence who did not fully trust him, was not fully and on all levels receptive to him, perhaps hungry for him enough to keep up with his richness, might find him to be "bad food", or might want to "eat" something outside of God (some kind of sin). Then that person would become desperate and start acting out, but would have nowhere to escape to without disturbing God's rest.

You can resolve to be friends with God forever with your will (with *you*, the real you), but if your "body" (or whatever part of your psychology is really where the "organ of trust" is located) can't stomach God, you will be tempted over and over by your indigestion of him to turn against him. If you model temptation (as I think maybe I would, although I haven't thought about this as much as I might) as "roll an N-sided die and if you roll a 1 you give in", then to be tempted by any finite-sided "temptation die" over the course of everlasting time, at some point you will roll a 1 and turn against God. You might be able to turn back to God after giving in (or maybe not), but in any case it would disturb God's rest. Therefore it is best for us to learn to trust God fully before we enter his rest.

(Supposing that your conscious love for God is unshakeable, so that you can roll the die and never roll a 1, every time you're tempted by your "body" to reject God, you will experience conscious stress, which will disturb God's rest.)

Another dimension of trust connects to loyalty. If you follow someone, you trust them on some level (true even on social media). To put full and unwavering allegiance in someone is to trust them, to trust that they satisfy whatever criteria obtain for them to be the thing in which you should put full and unwavering allegiance. The phrase "give your heart" to someone sounds like we are putting something valuable in the care of someone else, which is a form of trust.

This may not be a complete list of reasons why we must come to fully trust

God, but it's probably sufficient for now.

When I started this post, I felt like I couldn't say for sure ("categorically") that complete trust of God was necessary for salvation. But I think it's necessary for salvation, for reasons given above.

(I don't always stop to acknowledge my intellectual sources, mainly for having so few of them, not wanting to repeat the same names over and over, but I will say that a lot of my concept of trust comes from Joseph Godfrey's *Trust of People, Words, and God*.)

Labels: #God, #Jesus, #trust, #what is a person?

News: 26 November 2021

%news-26-november-2021

Friday, November 26, 2021

Recently I've started work on a couple of long-term projects, in addition to the book on the cross. One of them is a more organized version of MSLN than is on this blog, and of whatever other doctrines I feel should go with it. (Strictly speaking MSLN isn't about epistemology, or is somewhat indirectly about it if it is, but I might put epistemology in there.)

The other is a commentary on the Bible, which I expect to take a long time. The book is about the range of possible ways to understand God and what he prefers, and which ways we should prefer, act, and trust, given that range, for ethical purposes. Also, since I will be reading the Bible, I will see how well the philosophical part of MSLN (MSL, one might say) interfaces with it. (Basically, trying to apply the epistemology of love / altruism to the Bible, given the degree of epistemic and maybe therefore normative uncertainty involved.)

The two purposes of this text are: first, to provide information to any secular people who might have come through MSL to the point of trusting the Bible for ethical purposes (to see specifically how to come into tune with God). Second, to demonstrate the method of uncertainty filtered through ethics ("uncertain obedience") to recommend it to Christians to provide a way to settle doctrinal positions while still acknowledging what we don't know -- maybe this would help to some extent with significant church divisions like that between more conservative and more liberal / progressive Christians.

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Currently, with the first, philosophy project, I've read some of Copleston's *A History of Medieval Philosophy*. Also I've ordered the books in the Wadsworth Philosophers Series on Plato and Aristotle. I found that after reading their book on Berkeley, and thinking about Berkeleianism for a while, when I got to Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*, there wasn't a lot new I needed to understand. The titles in the series are written by different authors and are probably hit or miss, and Berkeley may be a particularly easy philosopher to summarize, but I'm still somewhat optimistic that I can get low-hanging fruit out of them without (as) much reading. Also I checked out a book on metaphysics from the library.

I tend to do better by learning the basics of other philosophers' views and then re-deriving whatever follows (that I feel the need to think of), and then maybe looking at the details of what they say. I'm not really

interested in being able to, say, accurately explain some other philosopher's work, but I do want to let them influence my own. I also find it useful to keep my mind in the area of philosophy by reading even about philosophers whose views don't interest me.

I don't intend to directly cite very much of this reading in my own book on my own philosophy, which is why I'm okay reading library books.

With the second, Bible reading, project, I have done some planning and drafted some introductory sections and have read about halfway through Genesis in the first pass of reading through the Bible (out of maybe four or five passes total).

Labels: #news and meta

Disestablishedness vs. Anti-temptation

%disestablishedness-vs-anti-temptation

Friday, December 10, 2021

Epistemic status: provisional. May be incompatible with something I've said about disestablishedness or establishedness.

In MSLN Reasons to Oppose X-Risks, I said that it might be the case that rebuilding civilization after a near-extinction of humanity, or an extinction (God restarting humanity), could be painful for God, involve many generations with less-than-ideal moral environments (in need of progressing morally to the level we've reached now), and, if our civilization is bad spiritually in terms of potentially leading to hardening (which it sometimes seems to be), ours might still be better than average -- if God wants to end our civilization, he should make that call (to "roll the dice" and see what the next civilization would bring). He could end our civilization unilaterally whenever he wanted, and since he hasn't, we might assume that it's our job to keep things going, to not let civilization end.

However, in Establishedness and Loving God (in the section on abortion), I said that civilizational disestablishedness can be uniquely good for developing people spiritually. This is why this life is better than heaven or the Millennium so that, from one point of view, it's not worth aborting babies so that they are not messed up spiritually by living in this life (instead of a nicer afterlife), or from another point of view, it makes sense that God has us live through this "vale of tears" rather than sending us straight to heaven -- being in a nice environment like heaven may not be conducive to us getting the really essential good, for us to become people in tune with God, who love him with all our beings.

It occurred to me that if the disestablishedness of this life is good, or has good effects, maybe a case could be made that if God had to restart civilization after human extinction, things could be better spiritually in the new, less-developed civilization than they are in our civilization as it is now. So then it wouldn't be as clear that we should continue our current civilization (or the human species) -- maybe we should let it (or them) end.

The way I try to resolve this is to say that there are two dynamics in civilization: (dis)establishedness and (anti-)temptation. Establishedness says "you are as you should be, you are the way you are". Anti-temptation

causes you to see God as desirable, seekable, trustworthy, or whatever else helps you to bond with him. If you are established in such a way that you do not seek the deepest connection with God, then for your own good, it's good for there to be disestablishedness in your life, to break your bad establishedness. But, in a world without anti-temptations, disestablishedness may not do any good. It's possible to break a bad establishedness without a good one re-forming in its place.

So over time, civilization works to reduce disestablishedness but it is the job of those who love God to anti-tempt, to make up for the loss of disestablishedness. Arguably our civilization has built up a lot of establishedness and anti-temptation. Compared to the Millennium, it is less established and has less anti-temptation. The ideal world, for spiritual development, is one that permits some establishedness but also has a lot of disestablishedness, as well as a lot of anti-temptation and not too much temptation. We have significant amounts of disestablishedness and anti-temptation nowadays, which likely makes our time more ideal for spiritual development than under the Millennium (on average, given that the disestablishedness and anti-temptation are currently unevenly distributed among the human population). Also because we do have anti-temptation to lose, it isn't clear that the spiritual regime that would result from restarting civilization would necessarily be as favorable for spiritual development, because it might not have as high a level of anti-temptation.

(Could Jesus (an example of an anti-temptation) be preached in a new (restarted) civilization after an extinction of humans? Certainly, but for some reason he didn't come (so couldn't have been preached) until 2,000 years ago. Maybe that reason would apply to telling about him in a new civilization, starting off from a low level of development.)

So it still looks like it is the case that disestablishedness can have good effects, and also the case that civilization is worth preserving.

Labels: #altruism, #civilization, #death, #establishedness, #seeking

A Reason Why Fiducialism May Be Necessary

%a-reason-why-fiducialism-may-be

Friday, December 10, 2021

In Fiducialism, I discuss the attitude of fiducialism, of seeking to trust. It can also mean an ethical orientation of trust-maximization.

Is it necessary to maximize trust? Here's a reason why:

We trust with something like a body. I would use the metaphor of "body" for the part of us that trusts, although it's not identical to the physical body. This body is opened up, or not. If we refuse to open all the parts of us, we can't fully trust God.

Trusting is valuing with your body. Your body says "this thing will enhance me" and that which enhances you is valuable to you (in this case to the part of you that trusts, your "trust body"). So if we can't fully trust God, we can't love him with all of our beings. Therefore we should seek to open up the different parts of our trust body, so that we can receive anything at all in those parts. We might prefer to not trust, but if we learn to trust now, we will be prepared for when we meet God.

Labels: #note, #trust

Sin is False Morality

%sin-is-false-morality

Saturday, December 11, 2021

Sin is often a moral act, it's just that the morality is a bad one. For instance, lust as a necessary thing for people to engage in in order to pursue mating partners so that their genes get passed on. It's extremely important that genes get passed on, so much so that men have to stare at every attractive woman who walks by, just in case it's an opportunity to pass on the gift of life.

Anger is necessary so that we can defend what is ours. It's extremely important that we not die -- we are the precious gift of life that is our responsibility to not lose -- so much so that if someone even gets close to being close to threatening a resource that might somewhat prevent our deaths, we must become angry -- just in case that's the critical thing that is the cause of us living an extra day or week or even month.

(Any other sin that can be linked to self-interest works similarly.)

When we make idols out of people or things, then we are being moral -- the morality of worshiping false gods.

Satan tempts us to be falsely moral, using responsibility.

There are theistic worldviews and atheistic worldviews. According to atheistic worldviews, there is no God to help you, no God to trust in. You have to take care of yourself. If you do wrong, you have to take responsibility for what you did, because there is no God to make everything right in the end. So your mistakes will never be covered over, and you need to always get things right the first time. Being very responsible in an atheistic way takes us away from trusting in God, because we must be in control of our own (or others') well-being, not letting God be in control. But in order to be responsible to God (to "fear" him, perhaps), we need to trust him. His reality calls for us to trust, so we need to respond in trust. Trusting God can be a deliberate, ethical act.

Being responsible to the wrong morality is potentially worse than to be irresponsible, although that also can be bad.

Labels: #atheism, #God, #morality, #overcoming sin, #trust

News: 26 December 2021

%news-26-december-2021

Sunday, December 26, 2021

Recently I haven't been posting as many blog posts. Part of that is because I've gotten more involved in my other writing projects.

The Bible project was going slowly for a while. I had to figure out how I was going to approach it. Over the past week I finally was able to go at the pace it will take to finish in what I consider a reasonable amount of time. The earlier chapters sometimes settle questions or prove points so that later chapters don't have to comment on them, which is an encouraging phenomenon (with respect to finishing on time). But as I go I find new writing styles and areas of discussion. So Exodus (where I am now) presents new challenges.

The MSLN project is doing okay. I'm currently writing up notes. I think I have enough to try to draft the Metaphysical Organism and Speaker parts (at least, a first draft), but I think I need to do more thinking about the Legitimacy part.

Labels: #news and meta

2021 to 2022

%2021-to-2022

Saturday, January 1, 2022

Review of 2021:

In the first half of 2021, I finished the *X-Risk* and the *The Feeling of Value* book reviews and EA population ethics reading list that I mentioned at the beginning of last year. I also wrote a review of Warranted Christian Belief.

I wrote other blog posts through June. Toward the end of June, I became more active on Twitter. I found the "Christian humanist" online scene (people into high church conservatism concerned with the relationship between Christianity and politics, and also human nature). I responded to a vocal member of the scene with Establishedness and Loving God, in September. Then in October and November, I transitioned toward non-blog writing projects. I had begun writing a book on "the cross" in the summer, and in the fall added two other projects: a more organized and developed explanation of MSLN and a Bible commentary. I worked on them in December.

Comparison of expectations with reality

My predictions last year were conservative, and came true. (I finished the reviews, did start reading and reviewing *Principles of Human Knowledge* by Berkeley, and started one more EA reading list.) I did develop MSLN more.

In terms of things that are retrospectively surprising, the most notable is finding the Christian humanists and finding myself writing a book-length blog post in response to them. I have had thoughts relating to politics in the past, but didn't see it as a core part of what I would write about. At this point, I realize that beyond Establishedness and Loving God, I may not be qualified to say much more in that space, so that might be the high-water mark of my writing on politics. However, part of me thinks that the subject is important, and that explaining how MSLN relates to policymaking and governance is actually very important in the long run. If AGI doesn't kill us all, politics may remain or grow more important in the future, because human decision-making could constrain how the AGI behaves (it having been trained to be our servant, or it respecting our values so much that it respects our value of us having agency as decision-makers). However, as important as I think social and political theory from an MSLN perspective is, I may or may not be the person to do that writing.

Preview of 2022:

The most obvious thing to predict, which I see ahead, is that I will continue to work on my writing projects (the cross book, MSLN book, and Bible commentary). I find myself writing less for the blog in the last few months and expect that will continue, although I may still write some posts, if it seems necessary to put a particular idea out there.

I don't feel as interested in the Christian humanists and don't see myself interacting with them much (unless perhaps I get a reply to Establishedness and Loving God). In December I made some contact with an EACH member (Christian effective altruism group) and think that I might try to interact with them some in 2022.

The Bible commentary is a long project which I think will be no more than 25% done by this time next year (at a most optimistic realistically possible estimate). I might have the MSLN book done by this time next year. (Or as done as I can make it without feedback. Given the kind of writing it is, it might need a lot of work once I get feedback.) I may not work on the cross book too much this coming year (mainly gathering sources).

Labels: #news and meta

Who You Are vs. What You Are

%who-you-are-vs-what-you-are

Monday, January 17, 2022

Epistemic status: provisional.

What is the difference between "who" you are and "what" you are? Who you are is your true preferences and identity and the expression of these through you. Ultimately you choose to be who you are. Maybe you start life with some innate preferences, and are given some identities by your parents or other older people. But by the end of your life (perhaps this process isn't finished until the end of the Millennium) you have thought through who you are a fair amount, have chosen new preferences and identities or chose the given ones for yourself, and have implicitly affirmed whatever innate preferences or early-given identities you didn't choose. Or you have done your best to reject them as far as you are able, this being *your* rejection of them.

God is omnipotent, two exceptions being the choices that other personal beings make to assert themselves (he can override their choices in the moment, but not the choices that express who they really are), and that he cannot do what is wrong. "What" a person is largely falls in the domain of God's omnipotence. That they have bodies, physical strengths, emotional tendencies, and so on is under his control. Except the choices that they make as themselves (as expressions of "who" they are) can sometimes override this.

God has partial control or influence over the "what" of being in a given social role. Social relationships could be completely engineered by God, but if they are to express the "who" of the people involved, that "who" limits God's power. God can orchestrate real social relationships (for instance, put people in positions to interact with each other, or override their unwise attempts to flee from each other) but not force them.

The bedrock of reality is, who personal beings are, and what they are emerges in how they relate to each other. God creates what a person is, but people modify the what of each other and are to some extent like creators as well.

Labels: #definition, #God, #ontology, #relationships, #what is a person?

Subjective vs. Objective Harm

%subjective-vs-objective-harm

Tuesday, January 18, 2022

Epistemic status: provisional.

See also Who You Are vs. What You Are.

Subjective harm is experiential and damages the state you are in, and is inherently temporary, while objective harm damages who or what you are, and is inherently permanent unless remedied.

What defines a person? In a weak sense, we are all that we experience. Everything that you experience is part of your experience body. In the strongest sense, we are who we are. We have preferences, and *we* choose to change them. But there may be a grey area in between, between "who" and "experience body". "What" you are (perhaps your physical strengths, or social roles, or something like that) is not exactly just the state you are in, nor your character.

Was Jesus harmed on the cross? Yes, his experience body was harmed. No, his character was unharmed. Was he harmed in the sense of "what" in any way? His physical body was harmed. A body can be made out of experience, but there may be another dimension. Was it harmed permanently? If experience is inherently temporary, then what is permanent about a person is how God sees them. He's the one who recreates our experience bodies whenever we exit unconsciousness. So in his eyes, was there any change in what Jesus was? No. "What" Jesus was was stored in God's mind and will and could be trivially restored into an experience body of Jesus' own (and was, when Jesus was resurrected). Jesus was only harmed subjectively, but not objectively.

But when Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, his body had wounds. So maybe "what" he was was damaged in God's eyes by the resurrection? I could ask, which would Legitimacy prefer, the Jesus who had been faithful and died (confirming the validity of Legitimacy by Jesus, a member of Legitimacy, being willing to bear the burden of human death), or the Jesus who hadn't done that? Real harm is destruction of true value, and God is the judge of that.

Maybe the body that is more "true" (if not more "beautiful") is Jesus' wounded body and Legitimacy prefers truth over beauty (or what we

conventionally think of as beauty). In the vision of Revelation, Jesus is both perfect- and powerful-looking (arguably) with (Rev. 1:14-15) "His head and his hair were white as white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace. His voice was like the voice of many waters." It doesn't say there either way whether he had wounds. The vision later (5:6) shows a lamb who appeared to be slain, which from the text I would assume is Jesus. I imagine a lamb with blood on its neck. My interpretation is that at the end of time Jesus will be both in some sense perfect (or impressive in the conventional sense, which we call "perfection" and which we apply to beauty and power) and in some sense wounded.

Whatever a person is supposed to be according to Legitimacy, they will be, unless through their decisions ("who" they are), they limit God (Legitimacy). Even the damage done to "what" you are, done by other people, can be restored, because God can separate any two people so that they don't interact with each other, and then he can restore the damaged one. But the damage done to "who" you are, can only be remedied by you, and sometimes damaged relationships and thus social roles won't come back, if one or both of the people involved are no longer "who" they used to be.

Labels: #God, #mental health, #morality, #relationships, #valuing, #what is a person?

Is God Lonely?; Could God be Mentally Ill?

%is-god-lonely-could-god-be-mentally-ill

Tuesday, January 18, 2022

Epistemic status: In the back of my head I think I may see things differently somewhat as I work on my Bible commentary. But I think this is my default perspective from natural theology.

Is God lonely, or is he socially fulfilled? MSL (as I currently understand it) requires that there be at least two persons who make up Legitimacy, and the Bible (in the orthodox view) says that God consists of three persons.

Someone I knew made a claim somewhat like this: God the Father enjoys community with the other two members of the Trinity.

I am not sure that person even believed in the Trinity and if not perhaps was trying to make me think of God in such a way that I would live a more conventionally healthy life. It's interesting that our concepts of God affect our concepts of what kinds of life are acceptable and vice versa. Maybe the person I knew believed that there's nothing to really know about God, so we should pragmatically shape our concept of him to serve our purposes, to deal with the obvious and undeniable problems caused by pain.

But if there's a fact of the matter about God, what is it? It makes sense that the Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy a strong bond with each other, and other than times like Gethsemane, which I would assume are rare, we don't see any temptation to discord between them. They have a complete kinship (on the level of who they are) by their faithfulness to being Legitimacy, and other than during Jesus' life on earth, they may have had no experience of parting or lack of communication.

But they are probably not emotionally satisfied on a social level, because of the billions of people who misunderstand them or even reject them. If you think of God as power, wisdom, and permanence, then God is plenitude. But God's power is thwarted by a single feeble human who chooses not to trust him. If you think of God as love, he is poor, because love impoverishes itself. God is disestablished by us and will only be established (really himself) when the beings who exist are fully in tune with him. By being our father (and not some professional deity) while we are strangers to him, he values us personally in a way that we do not reciprocate. And to love someone who does not love you in kind is a lonely thing to do.

One way to think of God is that he (or they) are vast, greater than all the stars we think are in the universe. But another way is to think that God is miniscule, only three beings in a vast sea of living people (and other spirits), and who knows how many dead people waiting to be resurrected.

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Does this mean that God suffers from poor mental health, in some sense? It sounds like it. But maybe that is what is required of love.

God has to manage to do his work anyway. We tend to think that we have to shut off our emotional understanding of reality so that we can get the work done that will make things better. This grown-up way of doing things makes it so that we no longer see the world as vividly, neither the rightness nor the wrongness of it.

If we take this to its logical conclusion, nothing matters, and then getting work done (the thing that was our reason for shutting off emotions) is pointless. We might think that God is a professional and sets his feelings aside to get the job done of serving us. But if he is too professional, maybe he will feel like there is no point to anything and blink us out of existence. We might not mind that, if we too have shut off our emotions to the point that we feel like our own existence doesn't matter. But we might not like it if he gradually lost a sense of meaning, and withdrew from the world on the personal level long before he stopped making the psychological and physical underpinnings of it work. A world that gradually gets more and more neglected by God is one that will get more and more messed up, more and more a hell. So we would want it to be the case that God is bound to an emotional truth, some set of emotional responses following from the meaning of things. God's feelings would enable him to keep us out of hell.

This truth, or these truths, may be inconvenient. They are part of Legitimacy, which is God and who he is. Legitimacy, that things should be and the way that they should be, determines how a person should respond to whatever the state of reality is. God has to respond to the truth even if it's not pragmatic. Instead, he has to feel the feelings that are true and still function. God's job is a hard job, harder than yours or mine.

(Also as a consequence of everything being experience and thus all metaphysical contact being that of consciousness experiencing another consciousness, God feels our pain exactly as we do and thus can't rest if we can't rest.)

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Is loneliness really mental illness? Even intense loneliness? What exactly is "mental illness"? Thinking it over a bit, I wasn't sure I could easily draw the line between mental illness and what is not mental illness. But I

thought "Why do we care about mental illness?" Generally we care about mental illness if it's something that makes it so that we are not in touch with reality, or so that we harm ourselves or others. Is loneliness self-harm? There is harm in negative feelings (subjective). Sometimes, but not necessarily to the point that we die, harm others, or fail to perform whatever good that we ought to for them (more objective). (The difference between subjective and objective harm.)

Being lonely might make us more in touch with reality. Both in the sense that when we are alone, we realize that we are alone most truly by being lonely, and because when we seek to be really in touch with reality, it might make us be alone. As a consequence of really being excellent at minimizing harm in the world overall, it may make you different from most other personal beings and thus alone on that level. So if we are trying to minimize "harm-and-being-out-of-touch-with-reality" (H + !R), we might need to sometimes become more lonely. Minimizing mental illness in a conventional sense might cause us to have more (H + !R), because "mental illness" as culturally defined may not consider the bigger picture of what reality could be. (Sometimes, of course, reducing (as opposed to minimizing) mental illness in a conventional sense reduces (H + !R).)

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We want it to be the case that God's (H + !R) does not get so high that he is untrustworthy, unable to fulfill the role of "good God" for all of us. Clearly, God is untrustworthy at least locally by allowing evil to happen (hence the problem of evil). However, this is bearable if we believe that there was a time before evil and a time after it is gone forever. We would like it to be the case that God is unshakeably good-willed and ultimately competent.

In the MSLN theodicy, it is assumed that God permits evil as a consequence of his holiness. It is because he is unable to will evil that he needs evil beings to will it for him in order for us to be tempted (a necessary part of us having a choice whether to love him or not), and then those evil beings have leverage to make the world worse than it needs to be. God is powerful enough to end any reality (any evil), but it turns out that for the best good outcome to happen (for us to really love him), he must permit the world to have evil in it (to end evil would mean he would have to end us). From that angle, God is behaving in a maximally trustworthy manner, because he is doing the best that can be done for our spiritual well-being. (But it is understandable if not all people can see that all the time, given what happens to them.) Still, what is most trustworthy is some day when evil is gone. God is not on the side of evil and can't stand it forever, so it will be gone, and hopefully each reader of this post will be on God's side when that day comes, rather than identifying with evil in any way.

MSLN theodicy (if it's true) gives us a reason to be certain that God's character is completely trustworthy and that evil exists for an ultimately good reason, and that in terms of "raw power" (what omnipotence may be talking about, I think) God is powerful enough to get his will done, and thus that untrustworthiness is only temporary. But another solution to the problem of evil could conceivably be that God is mentally ill, and inconsistently opposes and supports evil, for reasons that may always be inscrutable to us.

So now I would want to rule out the possibility that God could be mentally ill in a way that threatens his ultimate trustworthiness. I will attempt to do so using (H + !R) as a measure of trustworthiness.

(H + !R) = "harms self or others, is not in touch with reality". If God wills harm for others, it might be because it's the least harmful thing to do in the end ("teaching a lesson"), but if he's not into harm-minimization, he's not legitimate and not God. There are two ways to show this, the "abstract" way, and the "personal" way. The "abstract" way is that harm is a class of damaging something (by definition) which is a diminution of that thing's value on some level -- something which keeps it from its most-valuable state. Legitimacy (value itself) would have to be in favor of whatever was valuable, and thus for each thing to be its most valuable (and thus least-harmed), whenever possible.

The "personal" way is to look at "axizeiology" and consider how we as personal beings think of legitimacy, and especially maximal legitimacy (that which can't be argued against). It is as though we have instilled in us an instinct for recognizing legitimacy, which is helpful in identifying what legitimacy ought to be. We know in this personal way that beings that are maximally legitimate love, and choose the maximally competent course of action. To whatever extent that legitimacy is mentally ill, it still chooses maximally competent courses of action.

What looks like mental illness can be to be two or more wills in one body (or for a body to be possessed by a bad will), or to have a bad will which sometimes masquerades as a good will. In order for legitimacy to love, all of its wills must love (legitimacy can comprise multiple persons). There is a harmony in legitimacy. So what ought to be legitimate is a person (or a set of persons) who are not inclined to harm, and who choose the maximally competent path to avoid harm. Whatever could be called mentally ill in them must be something that doesn't impinge on that. Loneliness or other pains may be psychologically costly (subjectively harm), but they do not prevent God from choosing the maximally competent course of action. He (they, given that God is both a community and its chief member) always does the right thing given the constraints he works with. And to really love sometimes requires suffering, even intense suffering.

Is God in touch with reality? Legitimacy must metaphysically connect with all things it legitimates and thus has all data that exists at its disposal (it is conscious of what it connects to). Legitimacy connects to everything that exists. Does it sufficiently generate enough thoughts to understand reality in depth? (Like generating enough theories to understand given data.) In order to validate something, you have to know how it relates to everything else. Axizeiologically, Legitimacy must understand how everything relates to everything else as part of being competent. So God, as Legitimacy, must be completely in touch with reality, both by possessing knowledge of all that is and by coming to as deep an understanding of it as possible.

In that case, we have reason to think that God passes the (H + !R) test for trustworthiness, and so to whatever extent God is mentally ill, it does not render him untrustworthy. His mental illness is not a form which renders him incoherent internally, so he is of one unified will which loves.

Labels: #establishedness, #God, #Jesus, #mental health, #social connection, #suffering God

News: 26 January 2022

%news-26-january-2022

Wednesday, January 26, 2022

Over the last month, I wanted to get work done on the Bible project and MSLN book. But some things came up and I found it hard to get into a good workflow for those projects. I did do some good work for the MSLN book one day.

I did get some thinking done about the Bible project. I realized there was a significant "bug" in my process so far (which I had left off at the beginning of Exodus). I missed a couple of important dimensions to the question of how to ask who God is, the question I've been pursuing in the first pass of the Bible project. So now I realize I need to think of some way to make sure I have a good set of sensitivities before going forward. I don't want to get to the end of Revelation and realize "I should have been looking for X the whole time." It might happen but I want to do what I can to prevent it.

I thought about trying to come up with a philosophical account of what goes into who a person is. That's not an easy task, at least it doesn't seem so at first. Another approach is to go through Genesis and try really hard to think of different dimensions to who God is as I go through it. Then take a break. Then go back and do it again. Until I'm not getting anything new. Perhaps I will pursue a mixture of the two approaches.

Unrelatedly, I also thought of a way to improve my overall project (a better plan of action for the Bible project).

It's tricky managing this project because I don't think there's a formula for how to work. Should I push ahead? If I were really good at that, I might miss some of these improvements in "how" I do things. (I might get so far in I can't change to accommodate them.) I might excel at "that" I do them but have a worse final product. But if I don't ever push ahead and get things done, no final product will result.

Some of the time this last month I was working on computer maintenance. It's an interesting perspective to compare ideas to computer programs. Also, thinking about analogies between computer security and "mental security" (an analog of "mental health" or "mental strength"). I was struck by how when I looked in my virtual private server's logs, there were a lot of login attempts by bots that were just trying to see what would work (guessing passwords randomly). (This is typical for VPSes.) By analogy, things try to gain access to your mind and control you, like advertisements or attacks from the spiritual world. They are low-level and pervasive like the bots. And there's something cheap and dumb about them, like bots

guessing passwords randomly -- "seeing whatever works".

Labels: #mental health, #mental security, #news and meta

(Deceptive) Experiential Truth

%deceptive-experiential-truth

Thursday, February 17, 2022

Sharon Rawlette claims that the feeling of "ought-to-be-ness" just is goodness. She writes from a utilitarian point of view, a simplistic view of life, which is somewhat inhuman.

But we can clothe the feeling of "ought-to-be-ness" in more familiar and less alien clothing. For instance, the feelings of love, joy, and peace have no law against them. They are or have in them the feeling of ought-to-be, so of course there is no law against them.

We can call the feeling of love an experiential truth. Just to experience it is to connect to a truth, an absolute truth which can't be refuted. Perhaps that truth can be expressed in words, perhaps not. But either way, the feeling of love is 100% true.

If the feeling of love (or of joy, or peace, or whatever else) is not connected with reality properly (for instance if the feeling of love does not connect to actions or intentions of love, or the feelings of joy and peace blind us to other people's suffering, which is a truth in itself) then those experiential truths -- 100% true in themselves -- can deceive. Because of how we are, we draw false conclusions from their 100% reliable evidence. They are then like any other deceptive truth.

Labels: #definition, #morality, #psychology, #truth

Spirit of Rejection and Rebellion

%spirit-of-rejection-and-rebellion

Sunday, February 20, 2022

Some people understand what's wrong with having a spirit of rebellion against God, but other people may think that idea is just conservative religious language that really says "don't rebel against anything, least of all me (the religious authority)". It is possible for religious language to be a complicated metaphor for human life, and for talk of rebellion, or any other spiritual danger, to simply be a way for religious authorities to exert control over people. However, even if those authorities are using that language that way, and it is taken up by their listeners that way, it is still possible that rebellion against God is spiritually dangerous.

How could that be? One point is that if God is really right, and we rebel against him, we will have to act, trust, and prefer the wrong things. And our rebellion will keep us from him.

If the advice to "avoid rebellion against God" is too authoritarian, consider the word "rejection". When we rebel and we reject we often have the spirit of "f--- you". I wanted to find another way to make the point (and maybe I've softened it by not writing the word out directly), but I think the profanity captures the spirit in words in a way no non-profane words can. We have a spirit that says "f--- you" to authority, "f--- you" to people in authority, and, possibly, "f--- you" to God.

(Authoritarians can also have the spirit of "f--- you" to people who oppose them.)

The spirit of rebellion affects God as king, but the spirit of rejection affects him as father, friend, and personal being.

Labels: #definition, #God, #politics, #relationships, #suffering God

Normative Externality

%normative-externality

Monday, February 21, 2022

Let's say you want to say whether art is good. Well, there are different criteria of what good is in art. If something is very hedonic, it's good. But maybe at the same time it could be very anti-theistic, so it's bad.

There are cases when making art hedonic (or theistic) could make it anti-theistic (or anti-hedonic).

When a factory produces a product, that's (generally) a good thing in itself. But it could produce a dangerous byproduct in the process of doing that, and dump it in the river. We could call that an "externality".

A normative externality is when achieving a good state according to one value leads to a bad state according to another. Often, by "winning" in your own opinion, you might cause "losing" in someone else's opinion.

Labels: #aesthetics, #definition, #morality, #politics, #valuing

News: 23 February 2022

%news-23-february-2022

Wednesday, February 23, 2022

It's been a relatively slow month for me in working on my main projects. I did get some notes done for all three. I'm realizing that I maybe should try to figure out some of the controversial parts of the Bible to my own satisfaction before trying to do the main Bible project. At least, one such project, to understand the apparent conflict between Jewish and "post-Jewish" Christianity. How much does Paul (or other New Testament writers) disavow the Mosaic Law, or law in general? Is he anti-ethical, and if so, in what sense?

I've been getting more interested in politics and sociology. At this stage there is enough that I don't know that it's easy to find ways to learn more.

Labels: #news and meta

Ethical Theism

%ethical-theism

Thursday, February 24, 2022

Humanism is the ethical orientation toward human beings, and in parallel there is an ethical orientation toward God which can be called "ethical theism". An ethical theist believes not just that God exists, but that God is a person, someone who has his own personality, thoughts, feelings, history, his own preferred name or names, his own preferences, his own trustings. To an extent, God is the way he is and we have to come to love him as he is. He does not exist solely for our own benefit, but instead exists in his own right. He is someone who can receive love, be lonely, be driven half-insane with the pain of love, of dealing with our rejection of him (and the pain of seeing and feeling what we do to each other).

There is an atheism that denies that God exists, but another that denies that God is a *person*, the kind of being who can be seen as a personal being, someone who can really suffer, have needs, have personhood. I'm not sure any existing religion really sees God as a person -- maybe so, somewhere. What I tend to hear is people who think of God as a professional, or an awe-inspiring power, or a king, or a father -- but not the king whose head hangs down at the end of the day, or the father whose feelings can be hurt. It seems often that we want God to be a dispenser of goods, and that God is not someone to be loved in a deep way, the way that we love people we know, or even distant or past oppressed people groups. And because we can't love God that way, for ethical purposes he tends to cease to exist for us.

If we, as ethical people, ignore God in his personhood and suffering, we do something that we find deplorable when done to human beings.

Naturally, human suffering and personhood is widely believed in and undeniable. For those who do not claim to know God, they might say "we know that human suffering and personhood are real, but God we are not so sure about". That uncertainty should not lead us to dismiss the topic, but to have concern that we may be leaving a sensitive being out in the cold. And ethical theism worries that we are misunderstanding human well-being, which is a humanistic concern, but also a concern of God and thus part of ethical theism. If human well-being (what it is or how it is pursued) necessarily involves proper relationship with God, then maybe humans can come to harm if we don't take God's existence and personhood into account. Should God lose his children?

Whether a person ends up believing that the person God exists or not, to

not undertake the serious pursuit of the question doesn't fit with the moral logic of campaigning for justice for the marginalized, or of the doing of good for all existing sentient beings.

For those who do claim to believe in God, the question arises of what the facts about God really are. Does God hurt? Does he need? Do we have any reason to believe that? Do we have any reason to not believe that? To want to know the answers to these questions goes along with the desire to love God with all of your being.

Labels: #altruism, #definition, #God, #humanism, #morality, #suffering God, #what is a person?

Did Jesus Always Trust God?

%did-jesus-always-trust-god

Monday, February 28, 2022

Epistemic status: this is an incomplete evaluation of the question in the title. If someone points out another possible case where Jesus didn't trust God, or if I think of one, I may have to revise this.

In Is Complete Trust in God Necessary For Salvation?, I concluded that it is. But what if Jesus didn't trust God? Then not trusting God would be something God (Jesus) could do. Maybe it's okay to not trust God to some extent.

Notice that Jesus says "Don't be anxious" and then in Gethsemane says and does things like the following:

Matthew 26:

> 37 He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and severely troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me."

Mark 14:

> 33 He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be greatly troubled and distressed. 34 He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch."

Luke 22:

> 43 An angel from heaven appeared to him, strengthening him. 44 Being in agony, he prayed more earnestly. His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.

It is clear that Jesus was undergoing psychological distress. Was it a case of anxiety, and if so, would that mean that he was "serving Mammon"?

Matthew 6:

> 24 "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You can't serve both God and Mammon. 25 Therefore I tell you, don't be anxious for your life: what you

> will eat, or what you will drink; nor yet for your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 See the birds of the sky, that they don't sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns. Your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you of much more value than they?
>
> 27 "Which of you by being anxious, can add one moment to his lifespan? 28 Why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They don't toil, neither do they spin, 29 yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today exists and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, won't he much more clothe you, you of little faith?
>
> 31 "Therefore don't be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?', 'What will we drink?' or, 'With what will we be clothed?' 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore don't be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Each day's own evil is sufficient.

The "therefore" in vs. 25 seems to connect "Mammon service" with worrying about your life. Was Jesus anxious about his physical life ending?

The English text (also true in ESV) says that Jesus "sorrowed". Maybe it's possible to sorrow over an impending situation, to the point of agony, without being anxious. You could sorrow over something you were fairly certain was going to happen, as was the case here with Jesus, rather than be uncertain in anxiety.

Somehow being anxious is connected with serving Mammon, while sorrowing isn't? It's true that anxiety drives us to want possessions to protect us from death. We pile up wealth to keep us from even getting close to death (although we die anyway). Perhaps it was the case that Jesus sorrowed and was troubled, but had no intention to try to accumulate possessions to keep him from dying? Sorrowing does not produce the compulsive urge to fix things that goes along with anxiety. Perhaps it is that compulsive urge which is service to Mammon.

Jesus did want to get out of dying:

Matthew 26:

> 42 Again, a second time he went away and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cup can't pass away from me unless I drink it, your desire be done."

Mark 14:

> 36 He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Please remove this cup from me. However, not what I desire, but what you desire."

Luke 22:

> 41 He was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and he knelt down and prayed, 42 saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

Presumably he may have been tempted to unilaterally reject his mission to the cross and this was a large part of his agony. He decided to ask to be relieved of his mission, or somehow have it work without him suffering and/or dying, as though that was the result of his deliberation. But he went along with God's will.

I think to have made the unilateral decision to quit would have been to have chosen Mammon over God. But Jesus trusted God instead, and so served God.

Jesus was tempted to not trust God, but he didn't give in to temptation. I think to be tempted to not trust, maybe your body (or something like your body) has to not trust. But you get to decide what *you* do, and thus who *you* are. What you feel like in the moment doesn't necessarily reflect who you are, but the courses of action *you* go down do.

So, if the above is valid, we don't have a case of Jesus not trusting God and we don't have evidence that not trusting God is okay.

Having said that, it's worth noting that if you don't know enough to know that God is trustworthy, you will serve Mammon, but you won't be choosing to serve Mammon rather than God. The more you know about God's trustworthiness, the more your choice of Mammon-service can be deliberate and thus potentially sinful. But whether you worship an idol sinfully or without intending any rejection or rebellion against God, because the part of you that values is tied to something other than God, you are bound to something that competes with God, which is an obstacle to your salvation.

Labels: #God, #Jesus, #psychology, #relationships, #suffering God, #trust

How Can We Trust, Given MSLN Theodicy?

%how-can-we-trust-given-msln-theodicy

Monday, February 28, 2022

In a world where many things (maybe most things) could be the way they are as a result of MSLN theodicy -- a negotiation between God and Satan -- how can you trust anything?

The short answer is, by experience. If you find something to be trustworthy, you can assume that it is, unless something comes up that makes you doubt it. If you have a lot of experience with something, the room for doubt shrinks, although in principle it never goes away. For some things that are sufficiently trustworthy, not trusting them is riskier than trusting them.

Experience starts out as your own. Usually you trust other people before you come to be able to think critically, but you trust them because on some level you trust yourself (at least passively, if not always actively). If by trusting yourself you trust them, then you may trust their experiences, or perhaps their trustings that are based on their experiences and trustings, which broadens your potential epistemic and fiducial worlds (gives you new things to believe are true and new permission or motivation to trust things, and also gives you new things to doubt or distrust).

I find that satisfying (for now) in answering one sense of "How can you trust anything?" ("How can you allow yourself to trust anything at all?"). It's a general account that could apply to most worldviews, I would guess.

There is another sense to "How can you trust anything?" which is, practically speaking, how do you go about it?, which the above also answers to some extent. But, there may be more MSLN theodicy-specific ways to trust, to add to the account.

One obvious thing to do is to ask (when you have the chance to be reflective) "Which elements of this reality might likely be from God, or be aligned with God, and what might be from Satan, or be aligned with Satan?" Then, consider ways to mitigate whatever harm might come from Satan, in the cases where it seems likely that something might serve Satan's purposes. Or consider ways to mitigate potential Satanic furtherance when you could be wrong and maybe what you think is from God is really from Satan. (Bearing in mind the point earlier about the risks of not trusting things that really are trustworthy.)

Also, given what God is doing, how can you assist the basic drift of what seems to be communicated from above? We have the power to make reality more trustworthy, either to make the outcomes God intends more trustworthy (further his intentions), or the ones that Satan intends more trustworthy (inhibit his/their intentions).

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That expresses about how far my thinking has progressed on this topic, but there may be more to the topic than that.

Labels: #evil, #God, #trust

What if Doing God's Work Causes Anxiety?

%what-if-doing-gods-work-causes-anxiety

Monday, February 28, 2022

(A note:)

Being anxious (concerned?) about whether you will be willing and able to see your work for God come to completion is not clearly Mammon-worship, but maybe being excessively anxious (concerned?) about it is spiritually dangerous because you start to get worried, explicitly/officially or implicitly/subtextually/fiducially, that you are going to die of you don't do the work, in which case you may be failing to accurately understand God's love, believing a lie that keeps you from trusting him.

Labels: #note, #spiritual bondage, #spiritual warfare, #trust

Complacency / Anti-Complacency notes

%complacency-anti-complacency-notes

Monday, February 28, 2022

These are some notes I have about complacency and its opposite:

> Complacency: definitely a thing if you think or feel that you don't need to grow anymore. Actually, knowing how to grow may be beyond you, and growth is something you can't completely engineer. (You have to leave plants alone -- by their very natures they grow). The danger comes when you resist growth.
>
> Be concerned about you being complacent.
>
> Opposite of complacency: passion. We must love God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths. If you don't do the thing that you know is for you to do, for you it is sin.
>
> We need to grow in love of God. From time to time we are anti-tempted to, and if we choose to "give in", we love God more. These moments are often undramatic.

Labels: #note, #spiritual growth, #trust

Love Yourself, but Trust God

%love-yourself-but-trust-god

Monday, February 28, 2022

If you love yourself, you'll take care of yourself, and take care of your well-being.

If you try to maximize that kind of love for yourself, you won't be able to risk trusting God to take care of you.

If you try to maximize that kind of love, applied to others, you won't be able to allow them to exercise their trust of God. You will turn them from their trust in God, or you will create an intense conflict in them.

If you trust God to take care of you, other people may think that you don't love yourself.

True well-being requires trusting God. People who don't understand that can't understand people who trust God.

Labels: #God, #love, #mental health, #note, #relationships, #trust

Tranquility Seems to Autovalidate; Hedonism and Buddhism

%tranquility-seems-to-autovalidate

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Wireheading (my rough definition for this post:) is when we make ourselves feel rewarded, apart from some kind of reality. The default means is through some kind of pleasure or sense of well-being.

In Wirehead Gods On Lotus Thrones, Scott Alexander points out that wireheading sounds repugnant:

> Wireheading is commonly considered an ignoble end for the human race -- our posthuman descendants reduced to sitting in dingy rooms, taking never-ending hits of some ultra-super-drug, all their knowledge and power lying fallow except the tiny fraction necessary to retain delivery of the ultra-drug and pump nutrients into their veins.

but that something similar does not for him:

> Imagine instead our posthuman descendants taking the form of Buddhas sitting on vast lotus thrones in a state of blissful tranquility. Their minds contain perfect awareness of everything that goes on in the Universe and the reasons why it happens, yet to each happening, from the fall of a sparrow to the self-immolation of a galaxy, they react only with acceptance and equanimity. Suffering and death long since having been optimized away, they have no moral obligation beyond sitting and reflecting on their own perfection, omnipotence, and omniscience -- at which they feel boundless joy.
>
> I am pretty okay with this future. This okayness surprises me, because the lotus-god future seems a lot like the wirehead future. All you do is replace the dingy room with a lotus throne, and change your metaphor for their no-doubt indescribably intense feelings from "drug-addled pleasure" to

> "cosmic bliss". It seems more like a change in decoration than a change in substance. Should I worry that the valence of a future shifts from "heavily dystopian" to "heavily utopian" with a simple change in decoration?

I generally consider wireheading to be undesirable, but also I found a similar thing happening as Alexander did, when considering the two images of it. I found the lotus-god scenario basically acceptable, despite finding the dingy room scenario basically unacceptable. So I want to try to understand what is going on.

Maybe it's the imagery of the setting?

The future wireheading I imagine is clinical and efficient, each human (or post-human) slimmed down to the minimal size and complexity needed to experience maximal bliss, all lined up in a quiet hospital/factory/clean room, with robots maintaining them as necessary. Each (post-)human might be identical (because it turns out there's only one optimal way to solve for maximum bliss per resource expended). (In this scenario, we have no rational concept of what value ought to be anchoring us to a given axiology. So the concept drifts down economic gradients toward something that enables value to be mass-produced for as cheaply as possible. [Actually, maybe the cheapest value function to maximize is to say all matter/energy is of inestimable value and that nothing is needed to be done -- it's all conserved. Then, whatever was driven by value functions would cease. But maybe that idea should go in a different post.])

I think this (mass-production mini-hedonist factory) is more realistic than the dingy room idea. Aesthetically, I find this (the kind of hospital/ factory/clean room setting) neutral compared to a dingy room (negative) or the more spiritual framing of Alexander's Buddhas (positive).

Having (from my perspective) neutralized the effect of the negative physical setting, do I still feel wireheading is repugnant?

Not as much. To be true to my thought as to what may actually happen in the future, I had to add the part about people being simplified and maybe made identical. That erases human individuality, and it may be the case that this turns full-fledged personal beings into mere blobs of conscious experience. That sounds objectionable. But what if I adjust for that as well? If I imagine that somehow they are persons, who have histories and whose proper names each have a unique denotation and set of connotations? (I'm not sure how they would acquire histories in the perfected future, but I can set that aside for the sake of a thought experiment.)

I still find wireheading to be undesirable in this version of the thought experiment, but I find that when I imagine wireheading to be just "real

personal beings being in a state of blissful tranquility", as opposed to simply "bliss", it seems fine to me in the moment. I think the thing that makes a difference is that normally I think of pleasure in terms of "euphoria" or "being high". But "tranquility" gives it a different spin. I've experienced both intense euphoria and tranquility, and it's the tranquility that I find more trustworthy. As one might expect, the Buddha situation also seems fine when I imagine it.

I even feel like my MSLN-related arguments against things like wireheading and hedonism can't be worth worrying about. I intuitively know that they aren't true, just by imagining being in a state of blissful tranquility.

I am (like plenty of people, I guess) susceptible to imagining things. When I imagine blissful tranquility, I enter into that psychological state (enough to have an effect, although not fully) and find myself accepting things in general, including tranquility itself. This hedonic state is a feeling of ought-to-be-ness, and it persuasively validates itself -- or, has the psychological effect of validating itself in my experience -- exactly what you would expect from the feeling of ought-to-be-ness.

But rationally, *should* I ignore the possibility that when I'm blissed out, I may be preparing to harden myself against feeling real love, and against truly becoming kin to God? This would break God's heart -- can I comprehend his valuing of me and the pain I cause him when I'm on the drugs of imagining blissful tranquility? (And it threatens my destruction.)

When we perceive something that should be, it makes sense to feel the feeling of ought-to-be-ness. This is the natural function of the feeling. But if we are feeling the feeling all the time, it washes out our normative perception, our ability to sense what is acceptable through our direct perceptions of acceptability.

So perhaps the right way to think about the Buddha future is *not* to really understand what it would be like to experience, what the experience would be in itself. Or at least, not to let that be the definitive truth of it. There is reality outside the experience itself, and I want to know something about it, so I have to look at the Buddha future two ways: in itself (which says that on the hedonic levels of the hierarchy of betrayal it's 100% valid by definition), and abstractly, in its relationship with other truths (which says that it crowds out love / real valuing, a relationship with God and the truth, a kinship with the God who loved the world through its whole history, and a chance to live with God and the truth forever).

Beauty works very much the same way as tranquility. (Maybe beauty always brings tranquility, or they both always bring feelings of ought-to-be-ness.) The psychological state is nice, but can be a way we sell

ourselves evil.

From an outsider's perspective, the overall appeal of Buddhism could often seem to be "feel tranquility no matter what reality is". But, to be accurate, I should note that the emphasis on psychological peace and beauty can be found in the Christian scriptures as well. Jesus is a beautiful person who says "My peace I give to you." But he also warns of hell and denounces evil. (Speaking from memory and not from having studied to address this topic,) Jesus is balanced somewhere between Buddhism (or hedonism) on one hand and something like perhaps the worst of anxious Christianity or materialism on the other. There is both "spirit" (experiential/hedonic ought-to-be-ness?) and "truth" (rational relations; matters of fact?) in God.

Labels: #beauty, #Buddhism, #futurism, #Jesus, #mental health, #morality, #psychology, #Sharon Hewitt Rawlette, #Slate Star Codex, #valuing

Book Review Preview: City of God by Augustine

%book-review-preview-city-of-god-by

Friday, March 18, 2022

I'm interested right now in Catholicism, but also in spiritual X-risk. That is, the possibility of the state of civilization getting to where it hinders "catastrophic" (however defined) numbers of people from reaching God, or, in other words, causes or is upstream of "catastrophic" numbers of people hardening. One spiritual X-risk would be for a kind of *Brave New World* scenario to evolve. I can see this as a default outcome of secular culture given the way it is now and where it's headed. One might think that a better long-term future for humanity would be under the rule of the Church.

(Some people would wonder why Christianity is the right choice for all of humanity, and this is a good thing to bear in mind.)

If the Christian Church ruled over the whole world, what if it was teaching (or embodying) the wrong thing? It could mislead both on a "textual" or conscious level, or on a "subtextual" or subconscious level. It could fatally impede people's full love of God with their hearts, souls, minds, strengths, or any combination thereof. This would further Satan's eternal agenda, but the Church could also open up people to Satanic access in the "merely" here-and-now (abusive cultures, supernatural attack).

If so, would it be able to be corrected? Would it discourage self-correction? Could that wrong teaching or embodiment keep people out of heaven, even if it might be excellent at keeping them in the Church?

If the answer to that last question is "yes", then if we are "longtermists" about spiritual well-being, we should look at the spiritual failure modes of the Church as it might become in the future, and especially those of the Church ruling over the whole world. How can Satan use the Church? If the Church isn't aware of how he might, he probably will.

So I want to consider the failure modes of different Christianities, when it comes to spiritual X-risk. The most obvious candidate for "Christianity that might rule the world" is Roman Catholicism. But in the farther future, that may change. However, for now, it is an example of an existing pro-establishedness, pro-authoritarian Christianity, and is the largest Christian organization, so is currently closest to realizing a "rule of the Church over all". So I want to understand Catholicism better, especially in its political

dimensions. (I hope to explore other Christianities, particularly Reformed political thinking, which are in favor of something leaning "integralist", and also the anti-establishment Christianities, to see what their spiritual failure modes are.)

I am aware that my own project is in some ways like the Catholic project (both are concerned with holiness, civilization, an intermediate afterlife, natural theology, the ways in which Christian religion relates to all of reality -- and there may be other similarities I'm not aware of at this moment), but I think I base my thinking on different starting assumptions or spirits, and I feel like it might be wise to understand more clearly exactly what the similarities and differences are between the New Wine System or especially my own MSLN project, and Catholicism. Perhaps by reading a foundational book in Catholic thinking, I can see this more clearly.

(I don't want to try to be anti-Catholic by pursuing this, and the ecumenical side of me would hope that if any Catholics read of the potential failure modes of Catholicism and see something they realize they haven't taken into account adequately, they would seek to reform Catholicism to protect it and its followers from that danger. I think Catholicism is genuinely Christian and probably the values it most aspires to are best served by facing the dangers that could accompany its dominance. So this project should be aligned with Catholic interests, to some extent. However, I sense that MSLN will end up somewhat at odds with Catholicism, just as it should with all other existing Christianities.)

(This study may be of particular value to warn people who are into MSLN, since after all, MSLN shares some of Catholicism's project.)

(Also, it occurs to me to consider, what about if other religions sought to be the one religion over all the world? I feel like Christianity is the one to consider first, partly because I am trying to further it in some sense and want to know how things could go wrong if "I" were in charge of things; partly because I think as the largest religion currently and (in the Catholic church) the largest organized religion, it is the most obvious contender for "religion that rules over the world"; partly because I feel least out of my depth in thinking about it. But an analogous project should be pursued for each of the religions. I suppose that such a project could be pursued by someone who believed in the religion, or by someone outside the religion. If I were to pursue one of these projects, I would judge the religions by the standard of MSLN.)

(Also, what are the dangers of a bad religious pluralism? Imagine all the religions coexisting, functioning in some ways as a religion over all, in a way that is spiritually dangerous.)

I've had a copy of Augustine's *City of God* for a long time that I've never

read, and it seems like a fairly basic thing that talks about the relationship between religion (Christian), non-religion (non-Christianity), and politics. I wouldn't be surprised if I see it referenced a lot in other books on that or those topics. *City of God* is actually not just a Catholic book. I would guess it's part of the lineage of a lot of Orthodox and Protestant thinkers as well, because it was written before the major church splits.

The copy I have is abridged ("for modern readers"), the Vernon J. Bourke abridgement (introduction by Etienne Gilson; tr. by Gerald Walsh, Demetrius Zema, Grace Monahan, and Daniel Honan). That's probably good enough for me (the fact that it's somewhat abridged doesn't bother me too much). Maybe if I really want to get into ancient or medieval Christianity I can get an unabridged edition to re-read. Ultimately, I'm not concerned with what Augustine said, but rather with the reality of the present and future, but I think whatever influence I can get from him could be helpful in my own thinking. I think that whatever I read will help me get closer to understanding Catholicism, even if I could theoretically get even closer by reading the parts that were abridged.

Labels: #Christianity, #civilization, #death, #futurism, #politics, #religion, #Roman Catholicism, #spiritual danger

Re: Against responsibility, by Ben Hoffman

%re-against-responsibility-by-ben-hoffman

Monday, March 21, 2022

This is another in my series of posts where I respond to blog posts on here instead of by leaving comments. (See also Hero's Journey vs. Absurdism vs. Ancient Judaism and Re: Empiricism is Silly as an Epistemic Basis, by APXHARD.)

The post this time is Against responsibility (archived here), by Ben Hoffman.

You should probably read it before reading this, if you want to fully understand my response.

My response to "Against responsibility"

I like utilitarianism, but see how it could go wrong. One way to help might be to "price in" values that are threatened by utilitarianism into the values being maximized. (Like adding honesty or not controlling people to our list of values being maximized.) This could make for an awkward, hard to fully grasp, and therefore less useful "moral software", if enough values are added to that. But maybe that's okay. If there's a really high-stakes problem, which we have enough time to work on, our analysis of what to do should be complicated, cautious, and nuanced. Maybe we should use simplifications of moral software when we don't have the time or computational resources to do an indepth analysis. If you need a quick answer to a moral question, maybe use an established deontological principle. (This suggests a role for intentionally improving the supply of deontological principles, and for looking ahead to do moral analysis ahead of time of high stakes things that, once they come up, may not afford a lot of time for that analysis.)

If I had to specify a reward function that's worth pursuing maximally, it would be: "love God". But part of that is being aligned with God's interests, which are very diverse (and include not wanting people to be dishonest or to control other people). You might think that the answer is "maximize salvation of personal beings", and that that is all that God cares about. It is, but (the MSLN approach is), you have to watch out for your own salvation when you go to do altruistic things, because you are a moral patient, part of the world you are trying to help save. Your own salvation depends on you fully coming into tune with God, and your dishonesty or

controlling tendencies are an obstacle to that. Also, Satan has a way of using the sinfulness of prominent theistic altruists to make a horror of them and drive people away from God. (Similarly with prominent secular altruists, who are not as closely associated with God, but are associated with other good things.)

I think that practically(/ethically) speaking, we are in a position where virtue ethics, consequentialism, and deontology are all valid and there are ways all of them call on us. There are times the most ethical way to proceed is to think like a virtue ethicist, other times like a deontologist, other times like a consequentialist.

I think that epistemically speaking, though, reality is finite, countable, aggregable, including what is good, and the good is to be maximized.

Maybe it isn't too hard to count the good. It's just the number of personal beings who can live in heaven, and the thing that makes them fit for heaven is their holiness (how in tune with God they are).

This sounds kind of like evangelical (consequentialist?) metaethics merged with holiness (deontological/virtue ethical?) metaethics. Perhaps that is the characteristically New Wine way of doing things.

--

"Against responsibility" makes me think about my own personality and how it interfaces with effective altruist ideology. I found Singer's Drowning Child Illustration to be awful, true, and powerful. But I don't think I'm really an effective altruist as a result.

I've had that Illustration somewhere in my mind for about 9 years now. At first I was struck by the horror it implied about human beings, as well as by a call for mourning over that, and a drive to move myself. I think these three initial results are spiritually trustworthy and valuable. I was not driven to an exceeding sense of responsibility over the state of the world. I was driven to a sense that my time is not my own, and also that my money is an instrument to be used for good. I think it helped me to develop the sense that I am morally required to do my work.

But, my work is limited, and is not something that I consciously choose. I don't want to claim that I am especially guided by God in what I write (although if I write true things, then I am doing his will), but I do have the sense that I am given most of the materials and motivation for my writing from something/someone outside myself.

I'm not really capable of bending my work according to some kind of ethical formula. That includes expanding it. So, although my work has brought me into stressful situations that were in themselves unsustainable due to the people around me, I don't think I've ever been a true

"workaholic". I don't think that my work rules over me or controls me. Instead, it feeds me.

I don't really like competing or controlling, or in general staking my inner life on making the world around me be a certain way. Also, I have a somewhat quiet and weak personality, but also a persistent personality, and on top of that seemingly many constraints on what I am from outside myself, that aren't always socially legible. So in many ways I am who and what I am in a strong way. I think the tendencies and values just mentioned in this paragraph help to blunt or even weaken the force of the EA ideology that is in me both to do good or ill, and (speaking off-the-cuff in this "blog comment") I would say that I don't find myself troubled by the problems discussed in "Against responsibility". But, I have been shaped by EA ideology, and it has helped me to do more good.

I think there is something kind of Buddhist or Taoist in my difficulty in orienting myself to make the world be a certain way, and also somewhat like in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (detach yourself from the fruits of your action). Maybe I would say in "what I am", I lean Eastern, but in "who I am" or "what I value" or "where I want to go", I lean Jewish or Jewish-descended. And that might describe Jesus. So maybe that mixture of "who" and "what" is a good goal for those who want to follow Jesus.

Labels: #Buddhism, #Hinduism, #holiness, #Jesus, #Judaism, #math, #metaethics, #morality, #motivation, #personal, #spiritual bondage, #Taoism

News: 21 March 2022

%news-21-march-2022

Monday, March 21, 2022

Overall I've been moving slowly on the blog. I have some drafts piled up, though. Maybe I'll get the "time" (motivation, energy, whatever-it-is...) to release more of those in the next month.

I have decreased my attention on my main books, except some notes in preparation for the Bible commentary.

I feel somewhat pulled between the more "political, cultural, historical, personal" kinds of thinking, writing, sarkar, etc. and the more "first principles, philosophy, altruistic" kinds.

I started reading *City of God*. Maybe that's somewhat in the middle, both a reference for safeguarding the far future from an MSL perspective, and a participation in the "political, cultural, historical, personal" narratives of Christian civilization.

Labels: #news and meta

Value of People (Especially of Annihilated People)

%value-of-people-especially-of

Saturday, April 2, 2022

Epistemic status: provisional. I sense that I might not have thought through all its consequences, and it might break something else I've written.

Value values what is valuable. Legitimacy finds legitimate what is legitimate. God finds you valuable depending on how legitimate (in tune with him) you are.

But isn't it true that God finds sinners valuable, even though they sin? Isn't there a sense in which God values you just as you are?

God values the personal and the non-personal differently. Because you are a person, you unify experience into one thing (like a poem, or like how Berkeley's "minds" draw his "ideas" into one thing, themselves (in my terms, into one experience body)). God is not an experience, but rather is a person, and he relates to persons as his own kin.

Experiences don't have histories. They are part of histories, but do not have histories of their own. But persons have histories. An experience is not something that should have been or could have been other than itself. Sometimes it would have been better for a different experience to have existed in its place, but in itself it is what it is. But people can be beings which should have or could have been other than themselves.

Speaking positively, God values the "anti-sin" in you, the ways in which your "position" or "velocity" is aligned with him. These are contents of you or facts about you, but not you yourself. I think they are a promising thing to him, like a preliminary negotiation between you and him, where you take steps that help him believe that you will come all the way to him.

But God doesn't value the sin in you. These are also contents of you or facts about you. If you completely identify with the sin in you by hardening, you become incompatible with him and then in a way he doesn't value you -- your days are numbered. Everything is at least somewhat valuable as long as it exists, but its future might be taken away from it.

But for those who have not decisively chosen to hold onto evil in them, he considers them worth keeping in existence indefinitely, and forever by default -- that is, valuable. Value is reckoned by a person, and that person

hopes, when possible.

I can't remember right now if MSL commits me to saying that people who are hardened will be punished for their sins. But it makes sense from a Biblical perspective, according to the New Wine System, which is the Biblical source of MSL. Given the possibility that those who are hardened will be punished for their sins, while they are being punished, they are still valued. In both MSL and the New Wine System, the hardened are finally annihilated. Once they are annihilated, they no longer exist and thus in a sense lack value. Except that God remembers who they were before they chose to be one with the sin in them, and in order to maximally love, God mourns the loss of those persons who existed before they effectively killed themselves by the act of hardening. Part of who you are is your essence, the concept or memory of who and what you are or were, or could have been, not just the existing reality of who and what you are. So that essence remains in God's memory, whatever in you existed apart from sin. Even if you can't exist, God loves as much of you as he can.

--

Does the essence of a person really exist? It seems to point to them. Is there a unicorn in the street right outside? When I look out the window, I observe no evidence of one. But I have the idea of a unicorn in the street. Is it like the unicorn exists in essential form and just needs one more property (existence) added to it, to make it real? Or is it that the unicorn does not exist unless it's actually "out there"? And I only have the idea of the unicorn.

My laptop is real and essential to my experience of writing this paragraph. I have a concept of it, so it has an "essence" in the philosophical sense. If I turn my back on my laptop and think about it, does that thought refer to the actual laptop? What if someone vaporizes my laptop while I'm turned around? Does it still refer to my laptop then? My intuition is that the thought really does connect me with something real, but then, that thought may be incorrect (it may be the case that my laptop lacks the property of existence, for instance).

I haven't gotten to the bottom of this in the last two paragraphs, and I mainly wrote them to show that there's something complicated and confusing here. There may be an answer, but I'll leave it unsolved for now. But, supposing that there is no answer, does this affect God's love for us, specifically with regard to his mourning those of us who have hardened themselves?

One way to think is that God must see things, if possible, in the way that enables him to love the most. If possible, he must see the annihilated as in some sense existing, even if they lack the property of existence.

In order to maximally value something, you have to feel its loss as much as

possible when it's gone. In order to do that, you have to see it as being real as much as possible, to understand as fully as possible what might have been, but which cannot be. In order to make the lost real to himself, God must see them as still existing, in the way that we can find an essence to be real, even if in some sense it lacks the property of existence.

In order for God to be legitimate, he has to value and thus love as much as possible. He can't bear whatever is unbearable in who we are or were, but other than that, he keeps us in existence in his consciousness forever.

--

I want to say that, but I still feel like there is an unsolved problem.

Maybe I can partly solve the problem of existence vs. essence given above. I exist as an experience body, but also as facts and memories in the mind of God. Most of who and what I am is not accessible to me right this instant, but comes out in the right circumstances. Until then, God keeps track of it. So how much of me is anything other than thoughts and experiences in the mind of God?

In my experience body, I have some free will. That "I" in my current experience body which has some free will intuitively contains many things I'm not currently conscious of. And that is my personal unity. If that unity ceases, and my free will ceases, then "I" no longer exist. But who and what I am remains. They were part of "I" but now are simply the contents of God's mind. While they are part of "me", they have a certain inviolability to them. God can't force them to be legitimate, without destroying the unity of "I". So if I insist on holding onto sin, God will have to destroy me someday. Then, he can at least get rid of the sins that my unity was holding onto and be able to resolve his psychological state.

If I am annihilated, I exist in the form of memories, but my unity is gone. So maybe it's like I have my essence, and it fails to have the property of "free-will-and-unity", which may be what "existence" is for a person. In that case, no one can cease to exist, and when, in a theological context, we say "annihilated", we really should mean "has had the property of personal existence permanently removed".

Though an annihilated person ceases to exist in one sense, the person that they might have been remains in existence. It's sort of like saying a poet could have written a poem, given the inputs to their life, and who or what they were. They died, but the poems they wrote could be remembered, or poems could be constructed from what is remembered of their life. (This could make a writing prompt for living poets -- the poems that Shelley could have written if he had lived to old age, for instance.) But the tragedy is that the poet (Shelley, perhaps) never could be the one to write the poem. The poem could be made out of them, but they wouldn't be the one to make it. (But a living poet, unannihilated, can become the author of

whatever poems are inherent in who and what they are.)

The contents of a person are like the poems inside a poet. (Poets contain their poems as well as other contents.) This can remain and have value, even if the person is annihilated. The contents of a person speak of the person.

A person can relate to an annihilated person. The concept does refer to something. Perhaps to a dead person, and not really one that does not exist. The dead person exists, and is mourned, because they are no longer alive.

--

If a person's "spiritual body" exists after the second death, why can't God give it a new "unity-and-free-will"? If he did, would there be any meaningful way in which the person died? I tend to think that "unity-and-free-will"s don't have any inherent memory. That is stored in who and what a person is, which we have said survive the second death, at least all the elements that are legitimate.

It could be that while this post has focused on the "ontology" of consciousness (where everything is made out of experience-bodies), what we really are, and what we really experience, is "ordinary". We exist as persons, not as weirdly disconnected pieces of experience. Talking about humans as being made out of memories and experience bodies is just an odd, scientific way of talking, which gives us some idea of what we are. Our ordinary consciousness is more reliable than such "poetry", and is the starting place for all "scientific" or "ontological" theorizing. So it is we who are at stake, and we are the ones who must turn to God, ourselves.

To reconcile the ontology of consciousness and the ordinary in this area, I guess I could say that God, given his nature, wants us to exist as persons, or even can't help but process consciousness such that we are really persons. Thus it is impossible for him to simply ignore the sin in us and destroy it if we have not ourselves turned away from it, and then put the "spiritual bodies" of us into a new unity. Instead, the "spiritual bodies" are left dead, being only memories and "might-have-been". He can destroy some sinful habits, perhaps, which are illegitimate but only part of "what" we are, but not the sin that is in "who" we are. This enables us to love.

--

I found this post somewhat challenging to write. I might have been able to express it more concisely, but I think leaving more material in is a representation of the difficulty in writing it. (This is not what it means in every case that I write longer, less concise posts.)

What is the "takeaway" from this post? One thought is that I now wish that

"annihilationism" could be called something else. I do want to identify as an annihilationist, if that's the way to distinguish myself from being a universalist or from being a believer in eternal conscious torment. But otherwise, the above makes me think that those who are irrevocably lost are not "annihilated", but rather "die". Death is an unconscious state (contra eternal conscious torment) but is still an ending of a person's life (contra universalism). The language of "second death" is good -- but something that ECT proponents also consider to be part of their thought system. So it doesn't make a clear distinction against their view. Maybe "unconscious second death" (USD?) I guess that's okay. Maybe I will start using that, in cases where "annihilationism" might be misleading.

Overall in this post, I guess what I found challenging was the question: if something no longer exists, how can we relate to it?

If something changes, isn't it the case that some feature of it no longer exists? Yet, we can be aware that that feature used to exist. In that sense it still exists, but when it "ceases to exist", it changes. Maybe the word for that is that it "dies" (or "dies the second death"). Maybe potential things already exist, but change when they "come into existence". Maybe the word for how potential things already exist is that they have been "conceived" (or "conceived in the world of thought").

Otherwise, I would say that the post is about how God values us as much as possible, keeping whatever is good in us, valuing us more as we become more valuable, but still valuing us in that we could have been more, or could become more. Whatever in us insists on keeping illegitimacy in reality must change or we must die the second death. If we die the second death, our "spiritual bodies" remain, although now dead. The people that we were and could have been are parts of, or identical to, our spiritual bodies, and God will mourn those bodies, those past and potential people which can never exist in themselves. In this way, God can value and love to a greater extent, loving someone enough to mourn them if they die.

Labels: #death, #God, #metaphysics, #morality, #ontology, #valuing, #what is a person?

Storing Sound

%storing-sound

Tuesday, April 5, 2022

How does God store sound?

Could the sounds be loops? In that case, how would God remember the beginning of the loop after it had passed? It would cease to exist.

Could sound be something that can be sliced up into static samples, like with visual information? We tend to think of sound as inherently temporal, while there can be such a thing as "still" images. From a physical science point of view (from that kind of "poetry"), there is no such thing as a still image (if things haven't changed from when I picked up my basic knowledge of light). Basically, all images that we perceive are caused by flows of electrons, whether we take them to be particles or waves. So without time passing, they wouldn't exist.

However, I think it is very possible to perceive a still image. Maybe it can only be perceived in time, but the image itself does not change.

I think the same goes for tactile sensations, and I'm pretty sure also for smell and taste. But perhaps it is not as true for hearing?

If I listen to a pure, simple sine wave, that seems pretty static to me. So maybe God stores all auditory experience data as sine waves, and then does synthesis to make our experiences of sound, with whatever complexity there is in them.

It occurred to me as I thought about this that if you synthesize sounds, you have to have information guiding how you synthesize it. That information could be stored in some other medium, perhaps visually. Then it occurred to me that soundtracks to films are encoded visually. All you need is some way to decode the light patterns into the audio that we experience.

This post satisfies me for now that God can store audio, even if the storage medium has to be static.

Labels: #audio, #data, #God, #immaterialism, #note

Life Scams; Nice Maturity

%life-scams-nice-maturity

Tuesday, April 5, 2022

From my notes:

> Life scams: How the motions of life, of your life story, can scam you.
>
> I'm not sure how many there are. But here is one:
>
> You feel great in youth but have problems: the opposite sex / romance, not being respected, being trolled by friends/foes/ emotions, lack of confidence, lack of outward success.
>
> Then as you struggle to resolve all those things, you gradually or in obvious phases or moments come to not feel great. Maybe you enter a time where life is terrible. But, somehow or other many of your characteristically youthful problems resolve, with increased experience or being "broken open" by life stresses. Now, the temptation is to settle on this nice life, follow your instincts and pleasures, and become shallow, forget God to a large extent and not be altruistic. Your natural ability to be serious, to will, to long for somewhere other than "here", is broken down by stress, and that broken-downness allows you to enjoy social validation, a kind of "peace", health, well-being, and pleasure. You can be an ordinary human, and no one will object.
>
> Somehow, you have to see the temptation and spiritual attack in this, see what it would be easy to see as good as dangerous and mixed. You may have to remember to have courage to restore yourself to seriousness, quietness, and another kind of "peace".
>
> The scam works by beating you into a place where you "just want to be happy" and then offering you a way to be happy by giving you what you had longed for for years.

(It gives you some of what you had longed for for years.)

Labels: #life lessons, #psychology, #spiritual danger, #wisdom

Some Biblical Reasons to Think Sex was not Original to / Ideal in Creation

%some-biblical-reasons-to-think-sex-was

Wednesday, April 6, 2022

This post goes along with Omnisubjective Sexuality and will make more sense if you read that one.

--

Do we have any Biblical reason to think that the sex act might not have been part of God's original design? (These are some quick thoughts. As usual, the real answer to a question like this is to read the whole Bible with these questions in mind, and as usual, I like that thought. I am not planning to make sexuality a foregrounded theme in my Bible commentary, but I expect to maybe capture more of the Biblical picture about sexuality there, than I do here.)

The Genesis accounts of creation and Fall (ch. 1 - 3) are a natural place to look. Adam and Eve aren't mentioned as having had sex until after leaving the garden of Eden (ch. 4). No proof that they didn't in the garden, but nothing that overturns the hypothesis that they didn't.

It does seem like God always intended women to bear children. But maybe no sex act would have been required for it. Maybe that sounds like a raw deal hedonically but apparently originally God didn't want childbirth to hurt as badly. (A poll: "Women: would you prefer A) childbirth that doesn't hurt very much but nobody has sex or B) the way things are now?". Or ask men if they would give up sex so that women had only mild pain in childbirth.) Maybe initiating the process of bringing new life has to be addictive and intensely pleasurable if childbirth hurts really badly (and if life becomes so bad that sometimes you'd rather not do all the work of populating the earth).

Some more verses that easily come to mind are the ones where Jesus is talking to the Sadducees about marriage in the Resurrection. Matthew 22:

> 23 On that day Sadducees (those who say that there is no resurrection) came to him. They asked him, 24 saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his

> brother.' 25 Now there were with us seven brothers. The first
> married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his
> brother. 26 In the same way, the second also, and the third, to
> the seventh. 27 After them all, the woman died. 28 In the
> resurrection therefore, whose wife will she be of the seven?
> For they all had her."
>
> 29 But Jesus answered them, "You are mistaken, not knowing
> the Scriptures, nor the power of God. 30 For in the
> resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but
> are like God's angels in heaven. 31 But concerning the
> resurrection of the dead, haven't you read that which was
> spoken to you by God, saying, 32 'I am the God of Abraham,
> and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?' God is not the
> God of the dead, but of the living."

A careful (or adversarial) Bible student would try to figure out exactly what Jesus means by "not knowing the Scriptures" and "the power of God". My guess is that he could be saying "look in Isaiah and other passages in the Scriptures that talk about the Resurrection" and "of course God could raise people from the dead, and also, of course he could figure out a way to make the Mosaic Law work with his overall plan of salvation". This seems like kind of an obvious and basic way to read this, but I can imagine someone finding some kind of other way to read the passage, based on other intepretations of "not knowing the Scriptures" and "the power of God".

(I think some Christians think of the Resurrection as being the same as heaven, but the New Wine/MSLN understanding is that it is the same as the Millennium.)

Jesus' solution to the problem of multiple marriages in the Resurrection is to say that in the Resurrection, people don't marry, nor are given in marriage, because they are like the angels. There is more to investigate here: any clues from the Old Testament? Or from Second Temple Judaism? But, absent a rigorous search, just looking at this passage, it looks like there is something about angels that makes them different from humans. Humans will be changed into a different form that works differently from what we we are now. Perhaps we will have bodies of a new kind, unlike those we have on earth. It seems likely that angels have different bodies than humans. So, those bodies may not be capable of marriage.

Is marriage a bodily thing? (Or a lustful thing?) To the extent that it is not, isn't it, at it's most intense, a warm and familial friendship? (Or a particularly true one?) Do we think of such relations as "sexual"? The Biblical understanding seems to to have been that marriage is an

automatic consequence of having sex, or even that having sex is the physical act which begins a marriage ("the two become one flesh"). So that serial casual sex is a string of jarringly brief marriages, accompanied by adultery and/or divorce. Does it seem like that to us? Not to many of us, but maybe that's how it feels to God. But then, it would be strange to think of marriage as only being the union of flesh.

So maybe there are two kinds of marriage: the exclusive, fleshly marriage which it may seem from the Bible is shared between (in the phrase used as a slogan or resoundingly, in politics) "one man and one woman", and the not-necessarily-exclusive, spiritual marriage which is indistinguishable from a warm, familial, true friendship? Perhaps given the limitations of time on earth, many of us could only have a maximally warm, familial, and true friendship with one person, but in the Resurrection, or in heaven, there might be time to develop multiple such friendships to their full, if that is impossible on earth. And also there may only be a few people with whom one can completely scale (and thus escape) the hierarchy of betrayal, (something which the non-fleshly aspect of marriage seems to aspire to, which overlaps a lot with having a maximally warm, familial, and true friendship) due to some people being compatible with you on more levels than others. But in the Resurrection, or in heaven, there may be more time to find the ones that exist.

(I seem to remember that in the Resurrection (in the Old Testament), there is reference to children being born. So I suppose, in keeping with the above, that women could bear children in the Resurrection without having had sex. (Or men could as well?) Does this mean that angels can have children, or do have children? What would angelic/Resurrection childbirth look like? Some interesting thoughts.)

Labels: #family, #friendship, #God, #relationships, #sexuality, #what is a person?

Omnisubjective Sexuality

%omnisubjective-sexuality

Wednesday, April 6, 2022

Epistemic status: "essay-grade". This is an essay and I don't have a reason to think it addresses the subject completely. Provisional.

According to MSLN (and any view that holds that God's omniscience entails his omnisubjectivity), God experiences all of our experiences himself, exactly as we do.

In any system of thoughts, it's likely for there to be unexpected and odd features emergent from how the thoughts in it interact with each other and the world, and one that I didn't completely expect with this aspect of MSLN was the thought that human sexuality (thoughts, imaginations, and sex acts) are experienced by God. As though, to put it bluntly, God experiences something like virtual reality porn whenever people are having sex. (And I suppose also experiences "emotional porn" (something like romance novels?) whenever people experience that.)

What would it be like to experience other people's private experiences as your own? Does God want to lust after his own children? I would think not. So then our sexual experiences put him in a state of psychological tension.

Rawlette points out that there are "qualia of ought-to-be-ness" and of "ought-not-to-be-ness". From an omnisubjective view, when we feel something that feels like "ought-not-to-be" (something unbearable (my word), or painful (closer to Rawlette's thinking)), God also experiences that exact feeling, the exact qualia of ought-not-to-be-ness. In lust, there is an element of the qualia of "I-have-to-have-this". So when we lust, or engage in lustful sex (is that the only kind?) God experiences those qualia exactly as we do.

Both "ought-not-to-be" and "I-have-to-have-this" have a volitional element. We have in us a *prima facie* movement to not experience what ought-not-to-be to us, and to pursue to the point of possession what we-have-to-have. To really experience ought-not-to-be in itself as a volitional consciousness is to feel the volitional element as well as the hedonic or experiential. Similarly with "I-have-to-have-this".

So does God get involved in sin when we lust after each other? Yes, and no. "Who" God is is never sinful. But on the level of "what", God can be involved in sin. He is on some level involved in everything that is, and some being is sinful or even evil.

Do we sin when we lust after each other? The boundary between who and what can be porous. What we are can be to some extent broken, insane, and bent toward bad or unsustainable ends. But who we are isn't necessarily so, and who we are is the essence of whether we are sinning or not. The porousness comes in how strongly we, with who we are, resist what we are. It may be impossible to be completely sure that you couldn't have tried harder to resist a bad "what". But if you really are resisting as much as you can, whether you can know that or not, then "who" you are is trustworthy (even if it doesn't look like that to anyone else).

What's it like to be, in who you are, innocent, while in what you are, bent toward evil? There is a tension there, which even humans can feel, but which God, the most-sensitive feels to a greater and more constant degree. So when we lust, we make life more difficult for God.

Sexuality is ground into "the very fibers of being human" (so it seems, and maybe to a large extent really is). We find it very hard to avoid it, in the world outside us, and within the flesh of our minds. There are biological reasons to favor sexual activity. When civilization was in its "survival mode" (we'll say, up until industrialization), sex was a way to work to fight against depopulation. Now that we are in "hedonic mode", sex is a medicine we use to fight against feeling bad. In our culture we have a strong need to think of sex as a good thing and as a hedonic thing. This enables us to feel good about ourselves, driven as we are to "hedonically survive" (fulfill the hedonic imperatives that we can't seem to help fulfilling, as though feeling bad was a fate as bad as or worse than death). Given the existential difficulties of "survival mode" and "hedonic mode" (which are real and to be taken seriously), how can we integrate a concern for God (who is subject to our sexuality) into how we live our lives?

(Furthermore, sexual activity can help bond people together in what they are, and even in who they are. Whether it is necessary for that purpose, or if there is an non-sexual way to do that, depends on each couple.)

A very helpful thing to do (if possible) would be to somehow or other not hold onto the qualia of "I-have-to-have-this". Sex without "I-have-to-have-this" is not lustful. Also helpful would be seeking to have sex only within God's preferences. Sex that respects each partner as a human being, for instance. (Or looking to the Bible for an idea what his preferences might be about human sexuality. That's something that this post does not directly address, and someday I do want to. This one mostly focuses on sexuality in MSL.) These are good goals for ethically theistic people to pursue if they are married or seeking to be married.

Even if we minimize the sinfulness of sexuality, it may always be weird for God to experience our sexual relations. So we might try to be sexual in a way that tries to minimize that weirdness, using our empathy and imaginations to get an idea of how to do that.

It may be possible to not be sexual, perhaps by understanding and letting go of the qualia of "I-have-to-have-this", and the hedonic cost of being less sexual or asexual (the reason why sex is a medicine in "hedonic mode") may go down if we get beyond "I-have-to-have-this".

(Relatedly, it is possible that we can undergo spiritual manipulation using sexuality as an access point. The spirit of "amorousness" is a powerful one. Maybe it's like a kind of "spiritual alcohol" that we can get drunk on if we ever find the liquor lying around. Or if anyone (human or inhuman) spikes our water with it. We are being spiritually attacked by strong feelings that don't really belong to us but which loudly insist that they do, filling our minds seemingly completely, in the moment that they are there. People who experience mental illness sometimes feel the loud insistentness of depression, but fight against it so that they do not commit suicide. Out of love for life (or people, or God), they don't kill themselves. They find some way to resist. So, we can realize that whatever mood is making sex seem necessary or inevitable is not us and is enthroned above us and pinning us down so we are not as fully free to follow God. This realization itself, or other actions we take as a result, may free us from that feeling that insisted it was part of who we were. Sometimes to realize that Satan is at work is to be free.)

What are the boundaries of "being sexual"? We think of sexuality in a hedonic or experiential sense (genital excitation and satisfaction and the thoughts and feelings adjacent to it). An older meaning, more true to the etymology of "sexual", I suppose, is "the relations between men and women" (or between a man and a woman). Both of these definitions are polar, having at one end the very blatantly sexual (that which are *only* genital excitation and satisfaction themselves or which are *only* seen or naturally seen between men and woman) and at the other end personal experience that could easily not be sexual (often does not involve genital excitation or satisfaction, or often can be seen outside of contexts of a man and a woman). So perhaps the leading to consider God's omnisubjectivity in how we relate to each other sexually naturally leads us to consider his omnisubjectivity in the non-sexual aspects of life. (Sometimes the way to be considerate of God in our sexuality is very much the same as in our non-sexuality, and in some cases our sexuality is functionally hard to tell apart from our non-sexuality, so to be considerate in all of sexuality isn't too different from being considerate overall.)

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One value of sexual experience is the "post-traumatic value" of having experienced the same thing as someone else. In other words, the value of being able to help people with recovery from trauma.

God has to experience sexuality by way of experiencing what humans experience firsthand. So maybe we can understand what he goes through

best only if we have experienced what he has through human sexuality, through ourselves having participated in it firsthand, and also have the empathy and imagination to understand how weird it would be for him to go through that with all of his creation when they are sexual.

I think that what is actually good can evade ethical formulas. I would not recommend being a criminal so that you can reach out to criminals better, but if, for non-ethical reasons, you were a criminal, and then came to reject a life of crime, allowing you to reach out to criminals, then you may be able to do good in that area that nobody else can. The deontological ("don't commit crime") and the consequentialist ("bring about the best outcome") are in conflict and there may not be a rational resolution. Fortunately for the consequentialists, people's lives don't follow reason, allowing for better outcomes than what human best practices can allow.

But "don't commit crime" (or "don't have lustful sex") are not simply human best practices, but ways to avoid causing pain to Legitimacy himself, and thus ways to avoid doing what is really wrong in itself. So can I recommend wronging God? Fortunately, in terms of practical advice, it's easy in this case to say "many, many people can fulfill the role of helping God deal with what he's gone through during the many generations, whether in terms of crime or of lustful sex, so on the margin, avoiding sin yourself is worth pursuing".

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Why did God create sexuality? It could be that the element of sexuality that would be weird for God to participate in was not originally or ideally in his design for being human. There is more to sexuality than the sex act, which is clearly seen in the "man-woman" definition given above. And certainly lust was not in God's original or ideal design for human sexuality.

Maybe it's simple enough to say "It's all explained by MSLN theodicy." But I tend to want to find other possible explanations if possible. But that is where I will leave things for now.

(Some thoughts on how the Bible might show that some aspects of sexuality weren't original or ideal).

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This post so far has focused on actual sex, and not on pornography. But is looking at porn sufficiently analogous?

Do people who look at porn have qualia of "I-have-to-have-this" toward the people photographed or filmed in it? Not in a full-fledged sense where they rationally think they will. But still enough to bother God? Probably a lot of times they do. But what if they don't? Is that a problem?

If they don't because they simply have no sexual response to what they

see, then I guess there's nothing wrong with them looking at porn, on that count. God wouldn't "overfeel" (like "overhearing" a conversation) any qualia of "I-have-to-have-this" directed toward his children. But there might be a middle place, where the person looking at porn is aroused, but lacks desire of any kind for the people being shown, themselves. I'm not sure what to think here. Is arousal a kind of bodily "I-have-to-have-this" (like how trust is a bodily "I-value-you")? That sounds plausible enough to me to avoid looking at things that arouse me sexually, regardless of whether *I* desire the people I look at. Qualia are qualia, regardless of whether they are in the part of the experience body which really is *me* or in the part that is only part of my physical body.

What about drawn or animated porn? Or if someone has a tendency to be sexually aroused by inanimate objects or abstract symbols? It could be that on some subtextual level, what is desired is a real human being. It's like there's a hunger for a Sexual Partner, who is undifferentiated and vaguely human, and must be physically human-shaped in some way to satisfy the person hungry for it, and this is what they intuitively relate to when they become aroused by something that is less literally human or seemingly not human at all. A person's name is a mere word but represents whatever features they possess, including their physical body. So maybe an abstract symbol could be a word for Sexual Partner, which can satisfy the human body with enough of a human body or personal presence of its own. God probably doesn't even want to lust after Sexual Partner as a mental picture of one (or any) of his children. The simantic word Sexual Partner connects to... perhaps all human beings. This sounds plausible enough to me for me to avoid looking at drawn or animated porn, or if I become aroused by abstract symbols or whatever to not seek arousal through them.

So while I am not 100% sure that all forms of porn are equivalent to lust or lustful sex, I see enough here to err on the side of avoiding them, and recommending people to avoid them. Ethically, porn is lust to me, and maybe in the future, I will feel more certain on an epistemic level.

This section introduces some "philosophical moves" which might have far-reaching consequences that I have not yet thought through -- may break things elsewhere. One thing it might imply is that all sex is lustful. The human sexual response involves your body having to have a Sexual Partner, no matter what *you* feel, and it pulls on you despite whatever you really want -- and this also pulls on God in his omnisubjectivity. However, there is pain of varying levels of unbearability, and in order to spare God, if you must experience an unbearable pain, experiencing a less-unbearable unbearable pain is better. So the ideal of lustless sex (or the leading-in-the-direction-of lustless sex) is still a helpful one.

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What makes lust a quale of "I-have-to-have-this" may simply be that it is an

unbearable pleasure that calls for its relief through a sex act. So if you want to avoid lustfulness in your sexuality, you can try to reduce the unbearable element of it to a minimum.

Perhaps this is a simpler way to show why God would prefer that we avoid drawn or animated porn, or arousal through abstractions.

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I realized that I should clarify exactly why I thought that the God of MSLN wouldn't want to lust after humans.

Lust is a sin in the Bible, and so the God of the Bible can't lust and would feel a kind of psychic "shear" from his omnisubjective experience of our lust.

But what about in the case of non-Biblical MSL? MSL begins from a fairly limited set of starting assumptions. Does an aversion to lust follow from them?

Sexual desire can involve (always involves?) some unbearability. Any sexual desire that involves unbearability is something God can't bear for all time, and is illegitimate.

Is there something wrong with desiring another person in a sexual way, if there is no unbearability to it? Well, are there any qualia of "I-have-to-have-this" when we look at someone we sexually desire? If so, is there anything wrong with us "having-to-have" someone? If we have to have someone (or some experience of them or with them), are we putting them (or it) higher than Legitimacy? That sounds true.

God has to put Legitimacy higher than anything else. This is a reason why the Son has to make the sincere psychological motion of letting himself die -- and go through with it -- so as to put it ahead of his own life. By being legitimate in that way, the Son validates Legitimacy, allowing for existence.

So God feels psychic shear whenever we make anything into an idol. I think usually or always when we have to have something, it can crowd out all other competitors in our minds in certain moments, including God.

From a simantist perspective, or that of the original person, it may well be that God views us as his children. The fundamental unit of reality is not experience bodies, or hedonic calculators, or even conscious Law, but rather persons. There is a "thickness" to being a person which includes family relationships, perhaps. Being a father may be something primal, may not just be a technicality of being biological. And, the inappropriateness of incest may be deeper than simply being something

recommended by biology or culture. Biology and culture make poor gods, but it does make sense that they could reflect some of God's ideal design. The notion that power imbalances can make sexual relationships inappropriate may be a Godly one and not just a feature of our current culture (it sounds convincing to me, for what that's worth). In many respects, God is much more powerful than we are.

Having run through all this, perhaps some sexual desire for another human remains that does not stress God at all to "overfeel". But, in my limited experience ($n = 1$), that covers most or perhaps all of it.

In that case, other than those who are truly asexual, we all stress God, in the course of living life. (To be fair to sexuality, there are other ways we do, like anger, or any of the non-sexual sins.) Maybe there are ways for us to not stress God so much.

I'm not sure I've exhausted all the possible reasons why God would prefer not to lust after us, and there may well be good objections to this that I haven't thought of, but for the sake of getting this post done, I will say that's my case.

Epiconcept

Saying negative things about having sex is not the most popular thing to do these days, and I can understand that saying "the lustful aspect of sex is inherently bad and even if we can have unlustful (or less lustful) sex it might be weird for God" might sound like a harmful thing to some people.

We can't bear to think that we aren't seeking the truth or in touch with the truth, so we try to bend what people say the truth is so that we can feel like the truth says something that works for us and our needs. We don't accept this way of thinking in the realms of science and technology (at least in principle), but we do in the realms of politics and religion, which we seem to think are designed by us or for us. I think that the facts of God are the facts, and that God was not designed by us, for us. But I can understand that some facts cause harm, in the real-world of people trying to "install" them in their lives.

I think that truths which are poorly epiconcepted can certainly be harmful and to an extent it's my responsibility to try to epiconcept them better. I don't know of a way of expressing the truth in this that will never cause harm to anyone. I think that it can do good for the people who should hear it, and I would guess that most people who read this blog would be the sort to read random, potentially harmful ideas and not come to (too much or too-permanent) harm.

Maybe with a lot of my posts, I would leave things be and not try really hard to make what I'm saying safe, but sexuality is such a sensitive issue and so worked into our bodies and our current culture, that I think it's

worth getting into that here.

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Shame is a biological and cultural construct that is not necessarily what God wants you to feel. It may seem to motivate holiness, but there are better ways to become holy.

Humans like to say that you are how you appear on the outside. This way, they can hold you to account for your behavior, so that their lives can go better. There is some validity to this. But a lot of what you do reflects what you are and not who you are, or some kind of spirit that has come over you. Humans have power over other humans psychologically, but they are less valid than God. God sees you for who you are, and cares about who you are, not your physical nature or what has come over you.

It can be hard to tell the difference sometimes between who you are and what you are. Maybe you could try harder to resist the spirits that possess you. Maybe sometimes you should. But what is clear is that you are not automatically the same as whatever you do, and it is possible that your sexuality is a thing that is tacked onto you, and not something that is essentially you.

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If you think you have harmed God, you might feel a lot of guilt. Your guilt feelings themselves are felt by God and are inherently negative. If they lead you to repent, or some other valuable change, they are worth feeling. But otherwise, no. You don't need to feel guilt over what you don't really have control over. It is important to try to do the right thing in the cases where it's really up for grabs (where you can succeed, as opposed to not having a real chance, due to what you are). Satan can use guilt feelings against you, which is something to consider.

What's really important is who you are in the end, not what or even who you are now. The present matters only to the extent that it feeds into who you are in the end. The present is important, but not the only period of time. God wants to help reclothe you with a better nature, if you will accept it.

Runners run better when they look ahead of them, even to the farthest horizon possible, rather than looking back. Looking at the pavement is necessary sometimes to avoid tripping, but the far horizon is a better place to look if you can.

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Your body is like your parents. Both your body and your parents were handed down to you. Ideally you honor your parents, even though there are aspects to them that aren't trustworthy. Your body is the same way.

You can love your parents, and your body, overall, even if there are aspects to them that are untrustworthy.

The appearance of a human body can tempt people to lust. It's up to them to not give in, but it makes their lives harder when they have to experience that. Lusting after a body disrespects it, as well as hating it because it can be tempting.

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Look at sex not as negative or positive, but as a mixed thing.

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To a large extent, our ability to comply with God's wishes with regard to sexuality is limited, because our bodies are automatically sexual in ways we do not choose. God can give us new bodies which enable us to obey.

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The point of talking about sin and about harm to God is to love God, by turning against sin and ceasing to harm God -- especially, to someday become the person who loves God completely and does not sin or harm God at all.

Sexuality is not always the most morally relevant thing to consider. In some moments it can be very much the most morally relevant thing to consider. In other moments, there are other things that are more important. Some actions or attitudes (sexual or not) can have far-reaching negative consequences. Others don't. It's good to make sure you do what is really important, and avoid what it is really important to avoid, first, and after that worry about less important things. Sometimes sexual sin is not the most important problem to deal with, and dealing with it should be put off until later.

Hopefully in some sense we are all growing in moral resources and thus over time can afford to pay for more good actions and get further and further into "diminishing returns". In other words, as you grow as a person, you can deal with (and thus are potentially responsible for) subtler things. It's like what happens when you know someone for a long time and have given them all the gifts that they most urgently needed, and now are finding more and more subtle or small ways to add to how you help them.

Avoiding sin in such a way that you don't love God is more undesirable to God, and more dangerous, than trying to love him as best as you can but having a hard time controlling what you do, feel, think, etc. The latter can be destructive to others and yourself, and can give God pain, but the former is more likely to lead you to hardening and to exuding a spirit that tempts people to harden themselves.

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This is a basic attempt to epiconcept "omnisubjective sexuality". I don't know that it's the best that could be made. A really high-quality epiconcepting is done by people, not by words. In other words, in the context of a friendship, some difficult concepts can be made trust-able. Or, perhaps if two people who are married take this post seriously, they can help to develop an approach to sexuality together which is considerate of God -- maybe they have to come up with some of the aspects or practices of that themselves, and need each other to fully realize the epiconcept of this post.

I can't offer any of this, except the usual for a blog post, which is to offer to reply to comments on the post.

But I thought I should mention that epiconcepting can go farther than just a "disembodied" text.

Labels: #morality, #psychology, #relationships, #sexuality, #spiritual bondage, #spiritual danger, #spiritual warfare, #suffering God, #valuing, #what is a person?

Omnisubjectivity and Anger Placeholder

%omnisubjectivity-and-anger-placeholder

Wednesday, April 6, 2022

Anger and lust are close parallels. Anger could be the lust to commit violence or murder on someone, or anyone. So a reader might be able to get a good idea of a view of omnisubjectivity and anger by reading Omnisubjective Sexuality and using their reason and imagination to adjust what it says to the case of anger. I probably should do this myself at some point and write a proper post, but for now, this paragraph serves as a placeholder for that effort.

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One notable difference: God does have to will that some beings not exist, and some beings deserve to not exist. An emotionally truthful way for God to be in tune with this fact is to be angry. (Another would be hate, and these two emotions might be variants of the same root.) If Legitimacy is angry, that anger is legitimate. So anger is not always illegitimate -- as long as when we are angry, we are angry at exactly what God would be angry at.

Anger is dangerous but not always sinful. Someday there will be no anger because there will be no illegitimacy.

Labels: #anger, #hate, #morality, #note, #spiritual danger, #suffering God

Suicide

%suicide

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

How does MSLN deal with suicide?

I don't like writing about this subject, because I feel like I'm checking off the boxes of "things that an ethicist is supposed to deal with" or "things that an ethicist is supposed to make a ruling on as though they know anything". In a way, I would rather state the truth and not my rulings, and let my readers come up with their own rulings for themselves, based on their own understanding of the truth.

However, I have some experience with this topic, and perhaps can write to people who are contemplating suicide, or who might again contemplate suicide.

I don't believe that this life matters as much as atheists or some Christians do. This follows from MSLN. I think that our culture (and biology) scam us into thinking it is "the" thing. People make this life into a god, and they worship it by trying to control people so that they also worship that god. Death (at least, the first death) is more like "falling asleep". (The second death, the result of hardening, really is the end, and is something serious.)

Life is a time to be useful, whether through what we do or who or what we are.

I've never made plans to kill myself, but I've had my mind captured so that that action seemed like the default thing to do.

When I've been closer to suicide, I've done different things. I didn't really want to die, because I had things to do still. I also knew that as someone who was against the "life-god", I paradoxically had a greater duty to not kill myself, because people under its rule would automatically discount what I had to say against it, if they found out I had killed myself. I tried a number of different things to avoid killing myself, such as going to therapists (but the therapists were aggressive or manipulative, and not on my side, so I quit going), taking psychiatric medication for my bipolar disorder (a pre-existing, relatively contained condition made worse by the thing that was making me suicidal), exercising, talking to friends, and maybe other things that secular people pursue, to stave off "falling asleep".

I also prayed, and I wish that that always worked, so that I didn't have to do the secular things. That would say that God, and relating to God, were what saved a person, instead of a bundle of coping mechanisms which

could contain God, or not, whatever works for you. The "life-god" cruelly smothers the part of people that wants to love God more than life.

Praying did help sometimes, and gave me the gift of having heard from God, on some occasions.

I think that being suicidal (and experiencing other unbearability to a lesser intensity, over a longer period of time) has given me a sense of confidence, through a confrontation with life and death. I am not sure if I learned all the lessons that I can from that time, but one that I might learn is to understand the full nature of love, which loves when times are good and when they are bad. Love is not full-grown except if it has exercised its ability to deal with the desert, when it goes unrewarded for years. It is also not full-grown if it does not pay a cost. Full-grown love has paid a cost that goes beyond what it is willing to pay. So I hope that by resisting death, I was learning to love something.

My temptation is to say that I was learning to love life, but then the life-god wins and I am pinned down on one side, no longer free to go to God. Is it possible to really love God, when life pursues you? I didn't feel like I was learning to love life by resisting death, and maybe I wasn't, and was only learning to love. And if I can be whole-souled, I love God and those whom God loves, and not the clothes we happen to wear.

The love that comes in the desert and is asked too much of does not feel like love. But it is love. Sometimes, what feels like love, is love, a different kind. But sometimes it only feels like love, and is something fake.

Labels: #death, #God, #life choices, #life lessons, #love, #mental health, #mental strength, #morality, #personal, #spiritual bondage, #spiritual danger, #valuing

Size of God, Part 2

%size-of-god-part-2

Friday, April 15, 2022

I started to make two posts, which could be considered "philosophical building blocks". But I realized that either to make a good "building block", I should simplify what I wrote, and omit much of the material here, or keep the material, and change the genre of the post to an "essay" or "set of notes".

In Size of God, I mentioned that God's "size" could be his "power, speed, energy, capacity, or something like that." This post considers scenarios where it is God's capacity that is limited (in terms of quantity of experience he can access), and then whether, dependent on that, he has unlimited "power", which might mean something like "God's ability to speak exactly whatever experience that God wills".

Part 1: Forgetfulness in God's Rest

See also Size of God. This post was occasioned by Value of People (Especially of Annihilated People).

If God is finite in size, how does that work?

From an immaterialist perspective, God could consist of a certain finite number of experience bodies. These can neither be created nor destroyed. He creates persons by assigning experience bodies to persons, providing some initial formative experience, and unifying them into one being with free will. (From a simantist or ordinary perspective, these are persons who exist in some sense independently of him, are not really just extensions of him.) In order to store all of the experience which informs what or who a person is, a certain finite number of experience bodies are used. God has a budget for how much experience he can assign overall, and this limits the maximum number of persons who can exist.

The amount of experience needed to constitute a person (the subtleties of their preferences, their life histories, or whatever else) increases the longer people live. Memories and descriptions are stored in experience bodies. So if God is finite in size, this means that he has to forget some things to make room for new things.

Because he loves, he has to remember people, in whatever makes them who they are. But, once we have finished our development and have entered God's rest, the new experiences we have no longer affect who we are. So, God can forget them over time.

I imagine a double dream time in God's rest. Our lives on earth and in the Millennium, the story of how we came to be, may be stored in high detail. Possibly something we can recall perfectly if we want, possibly not, but certainly stored in God's memory. But we (and God) would eventually forget what we did in heaven, because God would have to use the same experience bodies over and over, an everlasting number of times. If anything really memorable happened in heaven, it would come at the expense of the number of experience bodies available to be recycled. So both we and God could imagine many different things happening in the interval between the beginning of God's rest (when all of us are done becoming fully legitimate) and the most distant memories of life in God's rest, looking back from where we will be in our present at that time. It would be a "time immemorial", and like other times immemorial, it could be an occasion for myths. We would have some clues about the forgotten time, given the state of things in what would be our present. But beyond that, the past would not be knowable by anyone, and beliefs about the (heavenly) past would be open to our imaginations.

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How much data can be stored in an experience body? The human brain limits how much humans can experience in any moment. But that may not be a hard limit on experience bodies in general. If it's a finite amount, then the discussion in previous paragraphs still obtains. But if it is an amount that can be increased indefinitely, then maybe God can remember an indefinitely limited amount of memories.

Imagine a computer with RAM that can be added to over time. If you want to find a page that's stored in memory, you need to know its address. But as you add RAM, over time, the addresses get longer and longer. Like with a phone number -- if you have 10 people, you only need a 1 digit phone number (dial 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, or 9), but if you have 11 or more, you need 2, which is good until you get to 101 people, when you need 3 digits. You need a certain number of digits to specify exactly which person you're calling. With RAM it's the same way -- so the addresses to locate the pages in RAM get longer and longer over time.

Another aspect to the complexity of adding RAM is that the CPU starts out physically not that far from the RAM. But as you keep adding RAM, you start to have to locate the RAM farther from the CPU. Eventually, your access time to the RAM increases.

Either of these factors can slow down a computer. Now, if either of these aspects more or less obtains (analogically) for personal beings, the bedrock of reality, then God would have to spend more of his time seeking memories, as opposed to whatever else he would do, as memories accumulated. We might not experience time slowing down, but God would experience his experiential diet gradually filling up with the mundane

seeking of memory locations, making it consist of proportionately fewer and fewer things like relating to us in a personal way. God can see you in the experience body in which *you* exist, and are conscious, for instance as you read this paragraph. This is more or less face to face contact, "*I*" (yours) "to *I*" (his), as it were. But that is only the "tip of the iceberg" of all the experience bodies needed to produce that face to face contact. Your past informs the thoughts that enter your mind seemingly from nowhere as you are in the presence of God, and if you turn your head, all that you can suddenly now see had been stored somewhere, and so on.

(God is aware of every experience at once, immediately. So probably the "physical distance" analogy doesn't apply. But if one memory needs to store information about how it is linked to another memory, maybe the information in that memory needed to specify where to find another memory would increase the more memories there were. So maybe the "increasing address length" analogy does apply. But then, even an increasing address length equivalent wouldn't take more time to process, since the longer and longer addresses would be immediately experienced. However, the longer and longer addresses would take up more and more of God's experience in each moment, and maybe that wouldn't be ideal. Also, it may be the case that higher-order processing of memories becomes more and more complex the more memories there were. "Might have been" becomes more complicated the more possibilities exist, maybe exponentially so, as we increase the number of memories that people have experienced in their lives. So again, God's experiential diet might fill up, crowding out things like relating to us personally, if there was an everlastingly increasing number of experiences.)

While God might self-sacrificially go through this, so that we could have a potentially infinite amount of memories, we won't require this of him, because, in God's rest, we will have become loving ourselves. We would sacrifice some of our memories, in order for him to have a better experiential diet. The specific size of the "load" of memories would be a negotiation between our needs and God's needs.

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I would assume by default that experience bodies can only store a finite amount of experience. If there's some way to add to them indefinitely, I think that for practical purposes there might still be a limit to how much memory God would retain.

Part 2: Limits to Omnipotence

If God has a finite "size" and this cashes out to him having a limited amount of experience to be aware of at any time, then is God really omnipotent?

Perhaps there is some threat to humans, and God can't afford to make the

thing that would stop that threat. The saving thing (maybe a giant mountain) would be one thing too many which all of us could see, adding too much detail to our experience bodies. Then God couldn't make that saving thing.

Of course, the simple thing for God to do would be to just make the threat not exist anymore, which would save him experience. So maybe the real example that could matter is if all of us need to see some experience, and God can't add it to our experience bodies. Like if for some reason we had to see a bronze snake at all times to bring us spiritual healing. In that case, I think I would say that God knows the basic experiential diet that is needed for our salvation, and budgets enough experience to be able to meet the need. In other words, God is conservative with the number of persons he will ever create so that he is fully able to do his part in saving them. I imagine that if, when everyone's salvation (or hardening) is complete and irrevocable, God has more experience left over, he can remember more of what goes on in heaven, and prolong heaven's history.

But what if God does not set a finite number of people to create from the beginning of time? The ultimate number is finite, but can be affected by how things go in human history. This thought troubles me, because it implies that it might make sense to reduce the amount of experience that people take in, to lighten the "load" on God. How would we try to do that? Would we try to shut our eyes and stop our ears as much as possible? Would we try to die young? Or to encourage others to die young, or to kill? These thoughts are counter-intuitive in a disturbing way.

I think that experience is a good thing for persons to experience. I don't think it's possible for people to spiritually mature without experiencing anything. It could be the case that a kind of experiential asceticism (if it doesn't impede your spiritual growth) could free up resources for God, in a more or less costless way. I don't think that dying young means God won't have to expose you to experience in the Millennium. The total amount of memories created would probably be roughly the same. There are advantages to growing up in this "vale of tears", and to participating in it to help others growing up in it, which biases us against dying young in this life -- it probably won't be better for us or other people if we do that, although there are cases where in order to pursue the cross it may be worth risking a young death. (Then there are the Biblical, psychological, and pragmatic reasons for having a norm of favoring living, and norms of not encouraging or causing the death of others, which add weight to it.)

In any case, there are multiple layers of uncertainty: Is the experience or the experience bodies that are in a sense the body of God something that he can indefinitely extend? Maybe, maybe not. If not, does he set a limit on how many people to create at the beginning of time? Maybe, maybe not. If not, then we consider the previous paragraph.

Part 3: Stop and regroup

Can we know that the size of God is limited? Or unlimited?

The conservation of matter and energy is familiar, but I'm not sure something like it applies to experience. But it could.

"Nothing comes from nothing" seems like a solid principle, but a thing that exists could expand and divide.

I am still dubious of the possibility of the existence of actual infinities. But a God (and thus a reality) that expands everlastingly would not have to ever actually be infinite.

If God needs more time to process reality, he can slow down the rate of our experiencing and run his processing in between times we are conscious. We could still experience it as continuous.

But, all the things I've said in the previous two parts about God being limited might be true. Experience bodies, and experience, might be limited resources.

Personally, I like when it's possible to show more clearly what the epistemic truth is. In this case, I am not sure I can. Someone else (or a future version of me), may be able to. In the meantime, there is epistemic uncertainty.

How should we prefer, act, and trust, as ethical beings, given this uncertainty?

Three scenarios:

1. It turns out God is limited in "size". Then, there is some incentive to a kind of experiential asceticism (experiencing simpler experience). How much is gained from that? How much is lost from not experiencing rich experiences? ("Rich" and "simple" are somewhat orthogonal to "painful" and "pleasurable".) Do we really know which experiences are "low-information"? The reality that we see is probably synthesized according to a process we don't know the specifics of.

These questions indicate that it might be hard for us to know exactly how to pursue experiential asceticism. But, maybe we can still get a reasonably good idea of how to go about it. The visual and tactile worlds (and maybe those of smell and taste), may be stored relatively faithfully to what we perceive, and so we can have some idea that, say, a visual field that is, perhaps, more easily compressed into something like a PNG, is simpler experientially, and puts less "load" on God.

But, granting that we might have some ability to guess at what kinds of experiences are simpler, there are other concerns. Does God actually want

us to pursue this? Why is the natural world so experientially rich, and why do we feel so at home in it, if God wants to discourage us from experiential richness? That's not an airtight argument, because the psychological naturalness of the natural world doesn't have to be a good thing. But psychological naturalness is good for mental health. Lack of mental health can impede our ability to understand things or to do good, and can tempt us to sin. So a naive anti-experience stance is risky.

Maybe God could have created the world to be simple, if he wanted more people. But maybe people can't be as unique if they don't have as many simantic words to value or disvalue. There is a tradeoff between having more unique persons and having them be experientially costly (use up "space" in God's mind). There should be a balance point at which unique persons are maximized.

Hedonic poverty affects God as well as us. If our experiential simplicity leads us to feel unbearable feelings (which could happen, or not happen), we stress God. (Experiential simplicity could be of a simple but not-unbearable experience, and not impose hedonic costs on either God or us.)

It's unclear to me if experiential asceticism is a good idea. However, one good outcome of pursuing it would be the attempt to be experientially ascetic such that it doesn't cost your spiritual growth. Trying to have an experiential diet that doesn't make you lose out on spiritual growth could cause you to be more intentional about growing, and about making your experiences (which are the main part of your life), as a whole promote your spiritual growth, so that you can succeed at being experientially ascetic without losing out on spiritual growth.

(If I were trying to be more experientially ascetic, I could try sleeping more. Or, I would go into a dark, quiet, relatively odorless room with an unobtrusive temperature and humidity; find a way to sit in it that was simple and which I could ignore; and quiet my thoughts as best I could. Both of these sound like lower-yield activities (or in the case of sleep, a non-activity?), and I think they can be improved on. Maybe there is a low-experience way to consciously love God in that time, which gets more return on the asceticism. There are existing contemplative practices that seek God (Catholic, Orthodox, Sufi, and for all I know, Hindu). There may be ways to improve on them or fit them better to the Speaker or Legitimacy.)

(So maybe it's not too unprecedented to suggest experiential asceticism. There is a possibility that such contemplative practices have an altruistic payoff in themselves (although they have an opportunity cost of other altruistic payoffs foregone, which should be considered).)

2. It turns out God is not limited in "size". Probably then the "inner workings" of "what" God is are less obtrusive to us ethically. We can look

at God as just "a person" and less "a person who has particular / peculiar limits". Humans who are functioning normally (with that degree of "buffer") can hide the inner workings of themselves in a way that is less possible for those under stress, undergoing fatigue, or undergoing some kind of mental or physical breakdown. The other things that are true about God (if, say, the Bible, or this blog, say true things) are still true, and are not complicated by the discussions in this post (the ones which rely on God's "size" being limited).

3. 1 and 2 talk about how to process the certainties that they represent, but 3 is about how to process the uncertainty of "it's either 1 or 2, or maybe leans more toward 1 or 2, or is somehow in the middle".

I will leave the elaboration of 3 for later, because it has occurred to me that there's another thing to consider.

Part 4: Limits on Population

Earlier in this post I wrote the following:

> There is a tradeoff between having more unique persons and having them be experientially costly (use up "space" in God's mind). There should be a balance point at which unique persons are maximized.

A lot of this post is trying to answer the question of "How does population ethics work according to MSLN?". Limits on how many people there can be affect how hard we should try to maximize population. We are sure that for people to be lost is bad, but what about failing to bring people into existence? If there is a hard limit to the number of people that God wants to create, then we should work really hard to make sure the people that exist aren't lost. God can always keep creating people if he thinks that there should be more people, up to that limit he set.

I think for legitimist reasons, God can't endure sin / illegitimacy forever. In order for it to be unacceptable to him / illegitimate, he has to reject it at some finite time. It has to completely end, for good at some point. He can't recover from it and experience it again, if it's really wrong.

But, how does this work? It could be that there is a finite time in which God can endure sin. Or, maybe more likely, it could be more like "growing degree days". God could experience a certain cost of sin / illegitimacy on any given day, and it could stress him in a cumulative way. God has a lot of "patience", the capacity to endure the unbearable. But he doesn't have infinite patience, and this patience could be drawn down more rapidly the worse things are in our lives.

If this is true, we have yet another incentive to not sin, or to become fully

legitimate sooner rather than later, or even to reduce the qualia of unbearability (since God finds those unbearable as well), because by doing this, we give God more psychological space to create more people. Also, while God's patience for illegitimacy is necessarily finite, it may be possible for God to partially recover from illegitimacy stress, due to us experiencing or choosing the opposites to illegitimacy: obeying his law, experiencing spiritually pure beauty or high-quality positive experiences (i.e. some forms of tranquility but maybe not wirehead or drug-addicted bliss), accepting anti-temptation, etc.

Some of the above paragraph suggests that creating beauty for (seemingly) its own sake is really helping God to endure, and thus may help him to create more people. If those people fully mature spiritually, then there will be more people in God's rest. If beauty comes at the cost of spiritual maturity, it's a bad thing. Or if beauty in one place produces enough horror or unbearability somewhere else, it's a bad thing. But if it doesn't, it's a good thing.

Reducing unbearability may sound like a reason to commit suicide. If your motive is to do good, you can probably do more good by staying alive. I know that being suicidal is hard and that the topic of suicide is complicated, but I've always found it motivating to live to think of the work I had not done yet for God. (Even if you are profoundly disabled, being alive in this life can be useful to God by providing people an opportunity to care for you or otherwise love you, as is pointed out by episode 19 of PloughCast).

Summary

I can tell that there might be more to write here, but I want to get this post out at some definite point in time, and if I wait to finish it until I am more sure I grasp everything, that might not happen.

So, I will try to summarize the situation:

The size of God may or may not be limited. I think it's always limited in the sense of not being actually infinite, but it could be everlastingly increasing.

God is limited otherwise than by his size. He must reject sin and so can't bear it forever. The period of time in which we can mature spiritually so as to be fully legitimate is finite.

The question arises of how to handle population ethics? What is the ideal size of our population, and how do we seek it?

There is some epistemic uncertainty here, but ethically, can we know what to do?

The clearest thing to do is, for whatever humans do exist, to help them to

avoid hardening, and to encourage them to connect with God. God can always create more humans if he has the resources to create them.

There may be things we can do to free up resources for him to be able to create more people. We can pursue experiential asceticism, the production of beauty or similar restorative experiences, minimize unbearable experiences, and seek to overcome our sinful habits and inner sinful dispositions now, rather than later. If these pursuits don't come at the cost of our full spiritual maturity in the end (or that of others), then they should be pursued, and may have an altruistic payoff on the level of "more people in heaven" and not just "loving God and/or people by giving them nicer experiences".

I would say that writing this post "updates" me in the direction of valuing contemplative practices more and viewing the production of beauty for (apparently) its own sake more favorably.

Labels: #computers, #contemplative, #data, #death, #futurism, #God, #what is a person?

Population Ethics of Animals

%population-ethics-of-animals

Monday, April 18, 2022

If animals had a view on population ethics, what would it be? Animals tend to have a wild approach to population ethics (increase their own kind as much as possible). Part of the tragedy of animals is that they don't control their own population sizes, so something has to kill them to limit them.

Labels: #animals, #death, #note

MSL AI and Animal Issues

%msl-ai-and-animal-issues

Monday, April 18, 2022

Epistemic status: written somewhat quickly, and it's an overview, so there may be things to add.

Issues with AI and animals, from an MSL perspective:

(I use "animal" to refer to "non-human animal".)

Are they conscious?

I know that I'm conscious. I start by knowing I exist and that God exists. Then, when I see a human, my credence is very high that they are conscious. My intuition says they are, and my reason doesn't go against it, although technically they could be p-zombies.

I behave in accordance with my consciousness, have a brain and a body. Humans behave and have brains and bodies of the same kind as mine. Animals behave and have brains and bodies of a different kind. (Not all animals have brains.) Sentient robots behave (however they do, presumably like humans) but have "brains" and bodies significantly different from mine. Consciousnesses don't have to have brains and bodies associated with them, but maybe they do have them associated with them anyway. (Brains and bodies are phenomenal objects, part of the content of consciousness.)

Could it be the case that consciousness only adheres to kinds of beings that God has created? (He breathes his spirit into his own creations but not into ours.) Definitely, that may be. Is it possible that he ordains it so that all appearances of beings that behave in a plausibly conscious way do have consciousness attached to them? That also definitely might be the case. Digital minds don't have bodies, only something like a brain, and may have some level of behavior. Maybe they are less likely to have consciousness attached to them because they don't have physical bodies.

So we have a hierarchy of consciousness, from an epistemological perspective: I know I exist and am conscious and God exists and is conscious, that humans exist and are conscious, that animals exist and are conscious, that embodied artificial intelligence is conscious, that digital minds exist and are conscious. The strength of my knowledge (my credence) decreases as I go down the hierarchy.

There are different kinds of animals, and some might not seem as clearly conscious as others. Sponges are technically animals and I am more

doubtful that they are conscious than that rats or apes are.

How should we treat animals and AI?

With respect, if for no other reason than for us to be respectful. Don't cause them gratuitous suffering. It's possible that AI are full-fledged personal beings and have spiritual lives that need to develop so that they can make it to God's rest. This also could be the case for animals, even ones which don't act like personal beings. It's possible that, like when drunk humans speak as though through a veil, but are still present in their bodies, animals may permanently live as though veiled. So they might be much deeper on the inside than we give them credit.

Animals are wild and tragic, but that wildness and tragicness might be of some benefit to them spiritually, just as similar conditions may be for us. So while it might be good to "husband them" or "pastor them" to make their lives nicer (or some would say instead to annihilate them, to prevent their suffering), we should bear in mind that their natural state may be better for them spiritually than anything we can come up with ourselves. (This goes for us as well, as we try to improve our own lifestyles.)

Part of the tragedy of animals is that we kill them, perhaps because they are dangerous to us, or because we can't help it (stepping on insects).

To the extent that AI are similar to humans, we have some idea how to treat them (by default, like humans). But I'm not sure what to say about them to the extent they are not similar.

How many of them should there be?

To the extent that animals and AI are analogous to humans (i.e., we are all "personal beings" on the inside), whatever population ethics obtains for humans, obtains for them.

The extinction of animal species may be a bad thing in itself. If we leave habitat alone, this allows animals to be wild and for there to be numerous wild animals. Maybe, if animals are personal beings, certain kinds of personal beings are best embodied by certain animals. If a species is no longer available to embody those personal beings, the next best has to be used.

How many of us should there be, given their existence?

It's risky to phase out biological humanity in favor of digital humanity, since there is a chance digital humanity is not conscious at all. For whatever reasons we avoid X-risks, we should avoid taking that risk. It's better to keep humans around.

Digital humans can be mass-produced with fewer resources than biological humans (I presume) so one might say there's an expected value calculation

to make. You could multiply the expected number of digital humans over the lifetime of the universe by the probability that they are conscious (call that product "A"), and compare that to the expected number of biological humans over the lifetime of the universe multiplied by the probability that they are conscious (call that "B"). If A > B, then it makes sense to phase out biological humans in favor of digital humans? My intuitions are a bit shaky on taking the risk of total annihilation in favor of many more humans. The "math-following" intuitions say "I guess go with expected value calculations" but the "it's better to definitely have something than to risk being nothing for the sake of something you didn't really need" intuition rebuts. I don't know how to resolve these clashing intuitions, at least not immediately.

But from an MSLN perspective, it doesn't matter. According to MSLN population ethics, maximizing population size isn't ethically required of us. So it is easier to say "keep biological humans alive."

Could biological animals be replaced with digital animals? Biological animals are always more likely to be conscious than their more-or-less identical digital representations. So I guess it's better to keep the biological animals around that we already have.

Labels: #AI, #animals, #death, #futurism, #morality, #what is a person?

Power is a Broken Relationship

%power-is-broken-relationship

Tuesday, April 19, 2022

In my previous writing (before starting this blog), I sometimes used the phrase "power is a broken relationship". What I meant by that mainly was "when you have a broken relationship, one person affects the other without understanding what they're doing, or without the affected person being able to affect them back, and that is what it means to be powerful in a relationship".

If you argue with a brick wall, you can't win. The brick wall will never be persuaded. If you argue with someone who can't (or won't) understand what you're saying, you won't persuade that person of your point. You'll feel like your arguments are invalid, when really it's just that the other person can't (or won't) engage with them.

Advertisements have a lot of power. (Words and books do, too.) You can't convince an advertisement that it's wrong to manipulate you. And the advertiser is far from you, and can't really understand what they're doing to you.

People in positions of power are inherently irresponsible. They literally don't know what they're doing, and they can't know, because if they did, they would no longer be in positions of power. Certainly, this is so by the definition of "power" given in this post, and typically people who affect a lot of other people (a broader definition of power) don't understand what they're doing to the people they affect.

Two people can have power over each other. They can both affect each other without understanding what they're doing to each other. This is a broken relationship. Group dynamics create a kind of "group being" or "group spirit" which can affect individuals, but be unable to really understand them. This is also a broken relationship.

There's a certain amount of power and brokenness that we find tolerable, but perhaps it is ideal to minimize them.

Labels: #communication, #empathy, #politics, #power, #relationships, #writing

(How / How Much) to use Resources Against Hardening?

%how-how-much-to-use-resources-against

Sunday, April 24, 2022

11 September 2023: made a minor edit.

How should we act / allocate resources (how much should we), given the possibility that some people will be lost to hardening? One idea is that if even one person is at risk, it's worth expending effort to save them. If they make it into God's rest, then that is of eternal value. The resources expended to save them will probably disappear at the end of human history or be trivial to recreate if lost.

But in practice, we tend to find it acceptable to not try to save everyone, when people's lives are at risk, either of the first or the second death. We try a certain amount, and then leave them up to their own devices, or chance, or other factors out of our control.

Yet, we do find it compelling to try to save lives, as a society, if enough people are at risk.

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For reference, what kinds of resources are expended to save lives, from the first death? (Secular life-saving.)

I don't trust myself to come up with specific numbers for COVID-19, so I won't try to say what that is on a societal level. Either someone has done this for the pandemic so far, or someday likely will. But on a personal level, I could ask myself "roughly estimate the unpleasant experiences and foregone opportunities due to trying to deal with the pandemic -- have I spent this much trying to save people from being lost?"

(I think for some Christians, the answer will be "I sacrifice more to save lives on earth that are going to end anyway, than I do on people's eternal well-being." Others, like myself, might say "I don't know.")

I do trust myself with one number, the order of magnitude of potential lives lost from COVID, the lives at stake which our anti-COVID measures have partially saved -- which is in the 10s of millions (judging from the death toll of the 1918 flu of 50 million given by the CDC). We are willing

to have a major societal response around the world in order to deal with things that threaten death tolls in the 10s of millions of lives.

On an individual level, what are the risks of hardening? This then aggregates to the societal risk of hardening.

A traditional evangelical (I'll say here) believes that everyone's eternal state is decided at the moment of death. It depends entirely on two factors: God's grace and their response. But God's grace never fails. So practically it depends on one factor, their response or decision to sufficiently fully trust Jesus for salvation. When people die, if they aren't going to heaven, they are going to hell. Hell might be a sort of "separation from God" that is not as literally what the Bible talks about (maybe more like C. S. Lewis' imagination of it), or it could be a more literal being burned in a fire. It lasts forever.

For a traditional evangelical, it is clear that at least all the people who don't profess Christianity, and possibly some of those who do, are in peril as I write this, at risk of losing their chance to avoid the second death, by dying the first, perhaps at their life expectancy, and perhaps much sooner. Traditional evangelicals could actually calculate the number of lost, kind of like how I used the death toll from the 1918 flu as a reference for what the death toll of COVID-19 could be.

But from an MSLN perspective, instead, it is harder to tell that specific people are definitely lost, and harder to say how much time they have. Most people have a lot more time to become saved than the duration of their lives on earth. They have the whole Millennium. But salvation is much more involved than in traditional evangelicalism. Many non-Christians are being saved because they are listening to God (the Father) without realizing it, and are becoming more in tune with him. Christians who have ceased to grow are in danger of being hardened. Who knows if someday I won't cease to grow?

I think that there is a big practical question to answer, which is "should MSLN people favor an 'urgent' or a 'patient' approach to salvation?" It may not matter too much in the end which is chosen as a global approach, because what is most effective in each particular case is either more urgent or more patient, and we shouldn't try to make sweeping, simplistic practical decisions, when we can simply deal with the people around us as they actually are in their particularity.

I would say the "urgent" approach is like that of the most intellectually honest true traditional evangelical believers. A stranger of that sort encounters you, talks to you, cares about you deeply, pushes you, corners you, forces you to say things, to confront whether or not you have met the standard that they are convinced of. It's sort of jarring to laid-back Americans like myself. I think there is a sort of basic belief in laid-back

American culture (properly basic or not) that no one is in any deep danger -- fear is not allowed, concern is not allowed. We are okay and we are okay with each other. The urgent approach is almost unhearable from that perspective.

The "patient" approach is that of theologically moderate people, or those who may have hell "on the books" but practically speaking ignore its existence. In a laid-back, pleasantly loving way, they gently lead non-Christians to make a commitment to Jesus, as though when those converted get to heaven, God will say "by the way, that whole time, you had no idea how much you were at risk of eternal hellfire".

The urgent and the patient approach each have their downsides. Urgent people can be pushy, invasive, and, given the traditional soteriology, "manufacture" a lot of shallow Christians. There is more fear in the urgent culture, which has its upsides and downsides.

The patient approach risks forgetting why Christianity is necessary in the first place. It may be that the beauty, community, and therapeutic benefits to Christianity are enough to attract many people, but then, maybe people don't need beauty, community, and therapy beyond what they already have, or secular sources are better. If it is actually the case that hell doesn't matter, that lack of a sense of necessity is not that bad. But if hell does matter, and patient Christians don't have a sense that Christianity matters, then they won't believe it does, and the people in the culture around them won't believe it does, either -- but actually it will, in a frightful and sorrow-inducing way.

11 September 2023: Originally "in perhaps the most frightful and sorrow-inducing way imaginable", which I think is unrealistic (the human imagination is capable of coming up with extreme thoughts, but the most extreme thoughts probably have little connection to reality). "Frightful and sorrow-inducing" is bad enough.

Maybe it is obvious how New Wine soteriology (especially as I've developed it in MSLN) lends itself to both urgency and patience. Hell is not eternal conscious torment, but it is still an eternal loss to God. Instead of a positive point of decision "for" Christ that seals a person's fate, there is a negative point of decision "against" Christ (hardening). On the plus side, there is a generous amount of time to decide "for" Christ, but on the minus side, the longer that time takes, the more time one could be at risk for deciding "against" Christ. The things we do in this life can give us some spiritual calculus (in the "dental" sense) which has to be undone at some point -- if we hold to it forever, it could be the thing that makes us choose "against" Christ.

As I've described things in the last paragraph, I feel like what is called for is to be "urgent", but with a long time limit. Or maybe what's really called

for is something that doesn't map perfectly well with a simple "urgent" or "patient" mindset and actionset. Maybe there is no answer on that axis -- but I think an epistemic "no answer" defaults to "status quo assumptions" or "patience" practically.

It would be nice if we could know something like a "reference rate of lostness" like how the 1918 flu gives us clues to how much COVID could kill if we didn't do anything about it.

Philip Brown (IIRC) estimates that only a small percentage of people will be hardened. (As far as I know, he's the only other person other than me with an idea on this.) From a global perspective, only a small percentage of people died of the 1918 flu (50 million deaths / 1.8 billion total population in 1918 = 2.7%, or 10s of millions / 1s of billions = 1s of percentage points). So then it matters how we define "small". Some "small" percentages call to us to put out total effort. As a Christian civilization (the "kingdom of God"?) we might ought to mobilize a response as strong as that against COVID for the sake of the "1 sheep" who has gone astray. But maybe there are some "small" percentages that are so low that as a civilization we can not worry about things, round it off to zero. Perhaps for those who, like God, are directly concerned with such "sheep", it is called for for them to care, but otherwise the rest of us can live like we're in heaven on earth, or we can rest in the assurance that we and those we know are exceedingly unlikely to ever reject God. (There's danger in that kind of sense of safety, and maybe only those who are really devoted to helping whatever people may be at risk of being lost are maximally safe themselves.)

I think it might be good, in a sequel to this post, to see if I can come up with any reasoning from an MSL perspective that might suggest roughly what the rate of "potentially hardened" (or "those most at risk of hardening" or "the amount the 'death rate' is at play") could possibly be. At some point in the future (maybe a long time from now when I do my Bible commentary) I may be able to find clues from how God approaches dealing with his people, to see what kind of "small" percentage that number might really be, or how he acts in the absence of knowing (given that the decisions we make to become in tune with God, or not, are up to us, in the present and future).

My general sense, as of this point in the writing process, is that reality calls for an urgent response, except that for practical reasons, the most effective response in the long run may be somewhat patient. (Kind of like how sleeping can be seen as valuable insofar as in the long run it serves the purpose of working.) I think for me this should be (and to some extent is) an update away from an inner default of patience.

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(Later:) If one person is lost, that's an eternal cost to God. Shouldn't we spend all our resources trying to save just one person? Any finite investment pays off if the outcome is eternal good. I think a good reason not to, in any individual case, is because by using too many resources on one person, we let two (or more) other people become hardened. Otherwise, all economic decisions are dominated by the risk of people losing out on eternal life.

People have free will and you can't force them to be saved or manufacture a good state of their hearts. (But you can (sort of) force one person, you, to be saved and manufacture the good state of your own heart, in the sense that who you are is up to you. You are among the people at some risk of hardening someday, as far as you know.) And you can care about other people's salvation in an urgent way while relating to them in a patient way, or with a kind of "modulated urgency" (like the urgency of a deadline... which is 1,000 years in the future).

Those last two paragraphs are about what is rational or even religious. According to rational ethics (the MSLN-based kind) and religion, we should be using all our resources to save as many people as possible from the second death. But, society runs on a different logic.

Society allows itself to not care about things because that's just what it has evolved into. Maybe society says "the individual is required to be ethical but in practice doesn't have to be". (Society does not speak coherently, although it speaks powerfully.)

Society sets a bar for "what we care about", and it motivates itself with some kind of thought process. That thought process has some relationship to what is rational or religious. So, our society says "50 million deaths" (first death) "from the 1918 flu is a big deal and we will do 'whatever it takes' to make those kinds of things not be allowed to do their worst, so we'll put people into lockdown and maybe make them do other things to deal with this basically similar COVID-19 threat". But, if society says that, why not say something similar with the threat of the second death, which could easily put at risk 50 million people? If I'm talking to society, it might make sense to bring up our COVID-19 response as a way to say "According to how society thinks about big populations risking death, we (society and its individuals) should mobilize a response at least as strong as that of dealing with COVID-19."

Even if in reality (rational/religious), we shouldn't need that kind of argument. As humans, "society-style" arguments ("sociological", in a sense) work on us, whether they should or not. (I don't want to say "as humans, society-style arguments work on us" as some sort of profound or normative description of who we deeply are and thus how things ought to be, but more as "this is a sort of bias or bias-like thing that we have to deal with".)

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Presumably God would always act rationally/religiously, rather than human-sociologically. Also, God's behavior is somewhat constrained by his negotiations with Satan. So I will guess that God's behavior in the Bible isn't the clearest source of information about the percentage of those hardened. It may depict some hardened people, or discuss some kind of concept of hardening.

Labels: #Christianity, #death, #economics, #God, #life choices, #math, #morality

News: 24 April 2022

%news-24-april-2022

Sunday, April 24, 2022

Over the last month I worked on the MSLN book. I am starting to feel like doing something new with the blog, also like writing fiction. Also I have some old writing (a book) which I will try to finish and release as my next main project. I'm still working on *City of God*.

Labels: #news and meta

What Does Caring Look Like for Me?

%what-does-caring-look-like-for-me

Sunday, May 1, 2022

I knew specific "broken-brained" people and who or what they were. When my brain is "broken", I can be them, and it feels good and natural.

Maybe caring looks like that for them. But what does caring look like for me? Not that, not really.

Going too hard on myself, or going too easy on myself, doing something that someone else is already doing, or can do better. But I am most useful to God when I ask "what does caring look like for me?" and come up with my best answer, which is plausibly correct.

It's important to care. Caring is how you value, and valuing is love. Value is how things are valuable, and thus it is important to care. Caring is who you are, and the way it affects what you are and how you act and trust.

What you are is clothing for who you are. The flesh of your mind and what it does are clothes that you wear. It's better to be the right small person than the wrong large person, and the right large person than the wrong small person.

Labels: #altruism, #life lessons, #love, #note, #valuing, #what is a person?

Loving Good Like God Loves Good

%loving-good-like-god-loves-good

Monday, May 2, 2022

If you hate doing the good and force yourself to do it, there's something virtuous about that. But in the end, you need to love the good like God loves the good, with all of your being.

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There's something easy about motivating yourself to do things you love, even if they are difficult.

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When overcome with depression or any other temptation, your feelings, or lack of feelings, don't necessarily reflect who you are.

Labels: #altruism, #God, #love, #morality, #note

Okay for Today

%okay-for-today

Friday, May 6, 2022

O Lord, someday I may cease loving you. Who can say what will come? But for today I will love you.

O Lord, someday I may cease breathing in. Who can say what will come? But for today I will love you.

Anxiety's object never comes to pass, only joy's or sorrow's. Your life only exists in the moment, and you contain your past in the present. You are not in hell right now.

According to MSLN, you can't know that you are permanently safe until you have completely decided to follow God, something which most people haven't done yet, and won't do for a very long time. And it is not safe for you to say that you have done this, certainly to say it to others and perhaps to think it to yourself, until you are actually in God's rest. But you can know, for today, that you have not ceased loving God, and that for today, you have not made yourself a permanent enemy of him.

Assurance that is in line with the truth can be real, but only provisional, until you are fully spiritually mature.

Labels: #death, #God, #love, #mental health, #note, #trust

Book Review Preview: Holy Resilience by David M. Carr

%book-review-preview-holy-resilience-by

Friday, May 6, 2022

See also the review for Holy Resilience.

In 2018, I wrote a book called *Patience*. It's a sort of strange book, most of which I can't remember right now. I've tried to re-read my old books in the last few years, but I haven't gotten around to reading that one. But I am aware of one part of it that opened up a big new area in my thinking.

Someone I knew back in the middle of the 2010s was a secular Jew around my age who was a history student. He pointed me to a book by Yosef Yerushalmi called *Zakhor* which claimed that "history was the faith of fallen Jews". What impressed me was a claim that Yerushalmi was using as background for his argument, which is I would guess not original to him, that the Hebrew Bible was the "cultural memory" of the Jews, and not history.

It struck me that the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament was something "remembered from" a position. Even as a non-scholar, it really looked to me like a lot of the Old Testament was written down in captivity. That's when the history books (1 Samuel through 2 Kings / 2 Chronicles) leave off. My naive theory is that a lot of the content of the Old Testament was oral tradition, and the editors or canonizers of the Old Testament chose which oral tradition to preserve and trust. The Old Testament could be historically accurate, but it's more like the past of the people in captivity, which makes them who they are, and only secondarily history in a secular sense (what literally happened in time). I don't think this takes away from the possibility that they are inspired. Maybe God wanted his people to remember their past a certain way. Maybe the events of the Old Testament literally happened in a kind of spiritual world, which is somehow in parallel with our own and which we have lived and will live again in our own secular way.

I thought that the Jews ended up being admirable because they were losers when they wrote down the Old Testament. They were losers who survived.

At the time, and still to this day, I don't feel a strong sense of identification with a people group. Some people are very nationalistic -- some in ways that seem good, others in ways that seem bad (like the Nazis). Nationalism

is a great way to start wars; motivate genocide and ethnic cleansing; suppress, shame, or dehumanize people; or waste time getting and feeling angry. Nationalism (as I used it in my book) doesn't have to just be about nation-states, but could operate at different levels -- it operates at the level of the individual with his or her own personal nation, as well as in the family or friend group, and in the church or workplace, and in various identities (races, sexes/genders, and sexual orientations as identities rather than as accidental physical facts, political or religious affiliations, fandoms), all of them nationalisms. The love that we have for ourselves and others is often (or usually?) nationalism. So every affiliation that draws persons into distinct people groups (one meaning of "political"), we could call nationalism. So that "nationalism" (which can include nation-state level nationalism) can make people brothers and sisters of each other, emotionally bonded, can give them spiritual nourishment, can give them a sense of being a person, can motivate whatever it is that causes people to help each other.

I don't think that that "good nationalism" is a good god, in fact, I think it is a tempting idol. But, "bad nationalism" is an obviously bad god that can also be an idol. And good nationalism, like all really good temptations, is a good thing in itself. Perhaps we need good nationalism (of a sort that is really good and non-tempting) so that bad nationalism or bad anationalism doesn't cause us to get desperate for good-nationalism-of-whatever-sort, leading us to idolize good nationalism.

So there are two questions: can we split good nationalism from bad nationalism, and how? And, can we make nationalism an inherently God-worshiping thing instead of a very good thing which turns us away from God? I don't know the answer to the second question right off the top of my head right now, but I have a suggestion for the first, based in the sort of notable moment of insight or inspiration I had when I wrote *Patience*.

Being ignorant of most of Jewish history, I saw the Jews as being the people group who wrote and remembered the Old Testament. So what kind of people wrote and remembered the Old Testament? Losers. So I thought, if I'm going to be part of a people group, part of a chain of cultural memory, if I'm going to adopt an identity as a person who belongs to other people based on their collective self-concept and "past", and in this way become a "thick" person who connected with people, what group should I choose? The Jews (the people who wrote and remembered the Old Testament) have claim to being the people of God's word. They certainly have a "past" (the Old Testament itself), which I could adopt. But, notably, they are also the losers of history, dispossessed, looking back on how they messed up, how they fell away from God, how they mistreated each other. I thought that if I intentionally identified with this, even strongly, I would not fall into the temptations of bad nationalism.

At that point I thought that if I was ever going to join a people group, for

real, on the level of "rootedness", it should be to the Jews who wrote down and remembered the Old Testament, or people who could be considered sufficiently like them, although not necessarily to the Jews in general.

Recently, I heard on this episode of the Israel Bible Podcast an introduction to David M. Carr's *Holy Resilience* which claims that the Bible (both Old and New Testament) came out of response to trauma, and that that origin enables it to speak to people in difficult times. This is why it has staying power over time, where more triumphalistic texts have failed. (At least, that's what I remember from the episode -- I may have misinterpreted or misremembered it.) If that is Carr's argument, it's akin to what I believe, but also maybe strangely askew to it. It sounds like maybe Carr will have the people of the Bible be winners after all, the winners who use non-triumphalism about their failed "battles" to help them win the longer-term "war" of survival. Survival is good, and "pays the rent" for the truth, but survival itself isn't the point -- it's a very good thing and therefore a very compelling temptation to idolatry.

I expect Carr to have interesting arguments, some of which may support my own point of view. I'm also perhaps expecting that he could say things which flesh out his point of view in a way that makes my own less attractive to me. (Sometimes seeing your reflection in a mirror does that.) So, I've bought a copy of the book, and intend to start reading it soon.

(I read the preface and it somewhat makes me think that Carr will not be in favor of triumphalism, but will also not be arguing for exactly what I would argue for.)

Labels: #biblical studies, #book review, #Christianity, #culture, #David M. Carr, #history, #Judaism, #politics, #religion

Praying to Begin to Care for the Non-Default

%praying-to-begin-to-care-for-non-default

Sunday, May 8, 2022

Sometimes I pray for God to help me keep caring about what is non-default (distant people, future people, people's spiritual state -- like whether they fully make it to him, caring about him himself). To care about what is default is what you do when *you* don't care about anything, in a state of deadenedness or exhaution. But to care about the non-default requires that you have "fight" in you, to push against the default mindset. That fight tends to be or always is intentional and conscious, a moment of decision.

This tends to prove successful for me, as though caring about the non-default is something that God wants me to do and will help me with.

It's been some time since I first encountered the question of the well-being of the non-default. In some cases, I remember the mechanism of the "inciting message" being all it took to open me up to those concerns. In other cases, I can't clearly remember how I came to adopt those values -- maybe I'm only gradually adopting some of them, but I have already begun.

I can guess that maybe someone who was approaching a potential initial valuing of the non-default could pray to God to help them to value it, in parallel to how I pray to continue to value.

Labels: #God, #mental strength, #note, #prayer, #psychology, #valuing

Gifts for Difficult Times

%gifts-for-difficult-times

Monday, May 9, 2022

Solomon was faced with the task of ruling Israel, a populous country. He prayed to God to give him wisdom and knowledge to help him be king.

Solomon was already wise, to recognize the difficulty of what he was facing.

I think a good exercise is to ask yourself if you are doing something difficult, or have something difficult in your future. Then, you can see what kind of gift to ask for from God.

Labels: #God, #life choices, #note, #prayer, #wisdom

Playing at the Role of Being Human

%playing-at-role-of-being-human

Friday, May 13, 2022

The spirits of grieving and of romantic love are characteristically human and lean atheist. Grief claims that there is no way to bring people back from the dead, and romantic love claims that your "exceedingly great reward" is a human being and not God -- two dimensions of atheism.

There is a sense in which such feelings, as real as they are, are spiritually risky, and can set themselves up as more real than God, who is actually the most real. And yet, if we do not feel them, how can we be human? If we are not human, then ... certainly we are not trusted by humans as much, for being alien to them, and maybe one could say that there's something inherently wrong with being a human who is not maximally human, or who is alien to humanness.

Jesus wept, even though he didn't have to. He knew better, but he didn't at the same time. Perhaps for us, we can inhabit the stage play of being human, and inhabit our roles in it, but still know that we have a reality outside it.

Labels: #atheism, #death, #drama, #love, #note, #social connection, #trust, #what is a person?

Book Review: Holy Resilience by David M. Carr

%book-review-holy-resilience-by-david-m

Sunday, May 15, 2022

I read *Holy Resilience* and my method for writing this review of it is to copy the preview of it and reply to it, like to a long email.

My "replies" are set off with --

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In 2018, I wrote a book called *Patience*. It's a sort of strange book, most of which I can't remember right now. I've tried to re-read my old books in the last few years, but I haven't gotten around to reading that one. But I am aware of one part of it that opened up a big new area in my thinking.

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I thought that the Jews ended up being admirable because they were losers when they wrote down the Old Testament. They were losers who

survived.

--Carr's book basically doesn't support my theory. Yes, they were losers who survived, but he tends to make it sound like they didn't choose to remember things the way they did from a sense of loss, of having nothing more to lose, but rather, they chose to remember things the way they did to help them survive emotionally. But, one of the ways of emotional survival was to make sense of things through self-blame -- there was a reason for what they went through, which was their own sins. This is a known trauma mechanism. That caused them to see the negative in their own past, which then got somewhere into their identity.--

--A Jew steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures would probably have the sense that the people of Israel were "mixed" people: chosen, but sometimes morally exemplary and sometimes the opposite of morally exemplary, who fell short of a holy God. There is a sense of being aware of spiritual danger in that stance and also a version of humility. I guess my perspective now is that the initial psychological mechanism was (or could have been) some kind of self-blame, and that may have come up over the years when things went really bad for the Jews, but that there is a "mellowing" effect that time and tradition has on a text which gives the text a life of its own. (Like cooking raw ingredients until they make a soup.) And once it "mellowed" (or "ripened" or "aged") the text was able to speak as though it had been edited, composed, and/or canonized, by people who "had nothing left to lose" and "just wanted to speak the truth".--

--Maybe the distinction between "having nothing left to lose and speaking the truth" and "self-blaming" is that "self-blaming" could be a semi-conscious or unconscious way to take control of a situation and to save yourself, but "having nothing left to lose", I could say by definition, is about letting go of control of a situation and not trying to save yourself.--

--However, one thing which I didn't determine in the one reading I did of the book, is exactly how epistemically trustworthy Carr is. I'm not sure that there couldn't be other valid stories about the origin of the Bible, and, supposing I could list them all, I don't know how much credence I would apportion to Carr's views. I often wished he would qualify some of his statements in keeping with the conjectural nature of what he was saying, and also, I would have liked to have seen quantified credences for those statements. I would have had a better sense that there was something possibly more to believe than what Carr was defending if I saw that, and I suspect that Carr does not believe that his view is conclusively certain and thus does believe that there is a wider epistemic world, and so it would be a way to have his text reflect his actual worldview to indicate its insufficiency. I would have also liked to have seen more endnotes or discussion in the text proving some of his cases, or referring to other sources that did.--

--But, I'm not extremely interested in history, but rather in philosophy and present and future religion. So, I am glad to face the distinction between "self-blame" and "having nothing left to lose" occasioned by his book ("philosophy") and then I continue to think that God may use "having nothing left to lose"-based "loser thinking" in the present and future of religion, given that good "loser thinking" can be good for people and society. I think that Scripture is validated not by the process of composition, but by how it speaks to people once it has taken its form, mellowed culturally, entered the world of ahistorical or extramundanely historical truth (as opposed to, say, random things people were saying about recent events) and become established and trusted by communities and individuals.--

At the time, and still to this day, I don't feel a strong sense of identification with a people group. Some people are very nationalistic -- some in ways that seem good, others in ways that seem bad (like the Nazis). Nationalism is a great way to start wars; motivate genocide and ethnic cleansing; suppress, shame, or dehumanize people; or waste time getting and feeling angry. Nationalism (as I used it in my book) doesn't have to just be about nation-states, but could operate at different levels -- it operates at the level of the individual with his or her own personal nation, as well as in the family or friend group, and in the church or workplace, and in various identities (races, sexes/genders, and sexual orientations as identities rather than as accidental physical facts, political or religious affiliations, fandoms), all of them nationalisms. The love that we have for ourselves and others is often (or usually?) nationalism. So every affiliation that draws persons into distinct people groups (one meaning of "political"), we could call nationalism. So that "nationalism" (which can include nation-state level nationalism) can make people brothers and sisters of each other, emotionally bonded, can give them spiritual nourishment, can give them a sense of being a person, can motivate whatever it is that causes people to help each other.

I don't think that that "good nationalism" is a good god, in fact, I think it is a tempting idol. But, "bad nationalism" is an obviously bad god that can also be an idol. And good nationalism, like all really good temptations, is a good thing in itself. Perhaps we need good nationalism (of a sort that is really good and non-tempting) so that bad nationalism or bad anationalism doesn't cause us to get desperate for good-nationalism-of-whatever-sort, leading us to idolize good nationalism.

So there are two questions: can we split good nationalism from bad nationalism, and how? And, can we make nationalism an inherently God-worshiping thing instead of a very good thing which turns us away from God? I don't know the answer to the second question right off the top of my head right now, but I have a suggestion for the first, based in the sort of notable moment of insight or inspiration I had when I wrote *Patience*.

Being ignorant of most of Jewish history, I saw the Jews as being the people group who wrote and remembered the Old Testament. So what kind of people wrote and remembered the Old Testament? Losers. So I thought, if I'm going to be part of a people group, part of a chain of cultural memory, if I'm going to adopt an identity as a person who belongs to other people based on their collective self-concept and "past", and in this way become a "thick" person who connected with people, what group should I choose? The Jews (the people who wrote and remembered the Old Testament) have claim to being the people of God's word. They certainly have a "past" (the Old Testament itself), which I could adopt. But, notably, they are also the losers of history, dispossessed, looking back on how they messed up, how they fell away from God, how they mistreated each other. I thought that if I intentionally identified with this, even strongly, I would not fall into the temptations of bad nationalism.

At that point I thought that if I was ever going to join a people group, for real, on the level of "rootedness", it should be to the Jews who wrote down and remembered the Old Testament, or people who could be considered sufficiently like them, although not necessarily to the Jews in general.

Recently, I heard on this episode of the Israel Bible Podcast an introduction to David M. Carr's *Holy Resilience* which claims that the Bible (both Old and New Testament) came out of response to trauma, and that that origin enables it to speak to people in difficult times. This is why it has staying power over time, where more triumphalistic texts have failed. (At least, that's what I remember from the episode -- I may have misinterpreted or misremembered it.) If that is Carr's argument, it's akin to what I believe, but also maybe strangely askew to it. It sounds like maybe Carr will have the people of the Bible be winners after all, the winners who use non-triumphalism about their failed "battles" to help them win the longer-term "war" of survival. Survival is good, and "pays the rent" for the truth, but survival itself isn't the point -- it's a very good thing and therefore a very compelling temptation to idolatry.

I expect Carr to have interesting arguments, some of which may support my own point of view. I'm also perhaps expecting that he could say things which flesh out his point of view in a way that makes my own less attractive to me. (Sometimes seeing your reflection in a mirror does that.) So, I've bought a copy of the book, and intend to start reading it soon.

(I read the preface and it somewhat makes me think that Carr will not be in favor of triumphalism, but will also not be arguing for exactly what I would argue for.)

--Overall, I think Carr's point of view was of humanism, survival in a secular ("first-deathly") way, self-care, healing. My point of view is more of ... not anti-humanism, but a humanism which must depend on loyalty to God, survival in a supernatural way (avoiding the "second death"), being

true and moral. So his point of view is all about how trauma makes people not triumphalistic and then they go on to be successful in the world. Assyria, Babylon, and Rome (who had triumphalistic narratives) are gone and largely forgotten (Rome less so, but still relatively forgotten), but Judaism and Christianity have survived to this day, much longer, and Carr thinks it's because of their ability to get through tough times with adaptations caused by trauma's mark on their text. Ironically, he does point out that Christians ended up persecuting Jews once Christians became dominant. But Christians got some of their cultural power, allowing them to be strong enough to persecute, from their ability to die without shame by calling Jesus' death on the cross good (by having that response to the trauma of seeing their leader killed). So the Christians ended up using the power of trauma for basically evil ends. So is trauma that yields power a good thing? It's only as good (in effect) as the use of the power.--

--But I would like to be in favor of trauma which produces holiness and truth, or perhaps instead of trauma (which we might define as being something that produces "kneejerk" reactions (for instance, of self-blame)), that adverse effects, exilic conditions, breakdowns of groups or individuals, or whatever other stresses occur should cause us to "lose" rather than develop the complexes of textbook traumatization. Maybe the kinds of things that break us generally do traumatize us and it's only as we heal and look back at the mellowed trauma that we can see a glimpse of loserhood and go on to choose to enter into that identity.--

--Or, we can willingly leave our "throne room next to God in heaven where we are victors and live comfortable lives" and instead identify, without being forced to, with the losers of history. That we prefer or inhabit a "throne room" does not mean we are not insecure, nor that we do not suffer and struggle. But we are still trying to hold onto victory as a value and onto our own victorious status, such as it is, as though it will save us.--

--(Lives of suffering and struggle can still be comfortable on some levels.)--

--One thing I should mention by way of warning is that I don't know if "loserhood" as I describe it is something that works in real life -- I feel like it is somewhat "untested" and I don't feel the strongest intuitive and emotional connection with it, it doesn't feel completely comfortable. It may work. It does feel right in cases of zero-sum or "insufficiently positive-sum" competition.--

Labels: #biblical studies, #book review, #Christianity, #Judaism, #mental health, #politics, #psychology, #truth, #victory

Both Teeth-gritting and Natural Love

%both-teeth-gritting-and-natural-love

Monday, May 16, 2022

Humans are motivated to get what they want, because they want it. Sometimes we can be motivated to do things because of some sort of external force. Perhaps some definition of virtue is "doing what you don't feel like doing". It is virtuous to be self-sacrificing in that way. Allowing an external force to rule over you, or willfully offering yourself to that external force, is virtuous, perhaps the height of virtue. Perhaps as though the real enemy is Self and not any other evil.

The problem with that view is that we may never learn to really want what is good. We tend to value what we desire, and when we value, we love. *We* have to come to love the good completely someday, and if we have a capacity for "teeth-gritting" love and for "natural" love, we are not fully loving the good if we don't love it naturally. Also, we are more likely to be effective in pursuing the good if both the teeth-gritting and natural sides are working together. To the extent that effectiveness matters in pursuing the good, it is better for us to prefer to have both teeth-gritting and natural love.

So, I do what is good because it is what I want. This is my selfish desire. (There's a sense in which it isn't selfish, if I chose to naturally want to do what is good because it was the right thing to do.)

Labels: #desire, #love, #morality, #motivation, #note, #valuing

Alien View of Two Cities

%alien-view-of-two-cities

Tuesday, May 17, 2022

Cities tend to be alike insofar as they are places to meet future spouses, raise families, go to school, work at a job, grow old, get born. Your whole life story can play out in a city, and there is a way in which your human life can sort of be lived the same no matter what city you live in. In Delhi or Lima (each under a cloud of smog), people meet future spouses, raise families, go to school, work at jobs, grow old, and get born. I went to Lima for a few days, when I was 17, and was impressed by the smog. But if I had stayed five years, while that would have been bad for my respiratory health, I might have gotten more involved in friends or perhaps a girlfriend, or a church, or something like that. The smog would have been a background condition, one which I noticed here and there, maybe every day, maybe not. But I would have been living my life, the important, (near?-)universally human parts of life, of developing as a person, caring about things which were emotionally weighty to me (God, art, science, etc.) and participating in other people's lives. I would have shifted back and forth from theism to atheism to agnosticism in my fiducial depths, and experienced whatever other essential features of the human condition. But the smog wouldn't have been worth mentioning.

The alien view of a city is to see the smog and not the people raising their families (and going to school, growing old, etc.), which is the familiar view of a city. Both the alien view and the familiar view are right, and both are wrong.

Except for time I spent in Davis, CA, going to college, I have lived my whole life in San Diego. I'm not particularly interested in travel, and tend to feel the monk's feeling of wanting to stay in my cell. When I'm feeling very local, I see nearby me only a few places, which comprise my whole world that I can see. It's as though San Diego is my house, and I'm looking out the window. My whole world is Southern California, plus a view into Mexico. The Imperial Valley to the east is a desert farming community, and Tijuana to the south is in another country, reputed to be dangerous. I don't go to those places very often. To the west is the Pacific Ocean, which is a watery desert. To the north is Los Angeles, which of all these neighboring places I have the strongest impression.

As an outsider, my view of Los Angeles is that it is a place of spiritual darkness. There is greater stress and hostility there than in San Diego. Los Angeles seems to have been shaped by the movie industry, which sells beauty, but it's an ugly place. The Hollywood neighborhood is not a vision

of beauty. But the sun shines "all year long" (not literally true, but something like it). A constant 72 degrees Fahrenheit may sound idyllic (it's the temperature you set your thermostat to), but that 72 degree sun gnawing at your skin, day after day, becomes a horror. You find yourself irritable under its gaze. (We have spells of this in San Diego as well.) That irritating pleasantness can even have an obscene component, the obscenity of people being fed things engineered to please them. Hollywood actresses are selected for for appearing beautiful to American men, but I have come to feel like I'm looking at a Doritos chip, a snack chip for the eyes rather than for the mouth, which has a dark energy to it, something to make me high, addictive and bedazzling. Films themselves are like Doritos chips, though they are all superficially beautiful. There is an obscenity to their beauty, which I see as an alien to them. Los Angeles is a place of desperation (aspiring actors and musicians), of broken dreams, of exploitation. While not all of LA is in the movie or music industries, I would guess that this spills over into the city at large.

When I go to LA, I often come in on the train. As it approaches Union Station, where I get off, I see the same thing every time, a kind of industrial landscape, with the Los Angeles River running through it, channelized with nothing natural about it, graffitied, sometimes with trash and the belongings of homeless people. In San Diego, there's nothing exactly like it. The Skid Row equivalent in San Diego as I've experienced it is smaller, and I have felt uncomfortable but comfortable enough walking through it, but an Angeleno friend had me canceling my Greyhound tickets so I wouldn't have to go to Los Angeles' Skid Row, where the LA Greyhound station is located. There is a hostility in Los Angeles, and an aggressiveness, both in the way people drive, and in the things people say. My Angeleno friend once said "Welcome to LA" after a homeless person went off in a train station in a way I don't think I've ever heard in San Diego. Being homeless is stressful, but perhaps more stressful in Los Angeles.

I visited a therapist in San Diego one time at a particularly dark time of my life. He said good things about Portland, but his opinion was that Los Angeles was a spiritually dark place. I don't want to be unfair to spiritualities which are not Christian, but I will note that goth and occult spiritualities and aesthetics are relatively strong in Los Angeles, and while they could be defended by some as not being really bad for you, their imagery tends to be dark and often weird, a participation in horror. David Bowie went through his worst years in Los Angeles crawling deeper into cocaine and occultism, enabled by false friends and money.

Hollywood (and Los Angeles, to the extent that Los Angeles is a support organ for it) sells America, and the world, fake beauty, so no wonder Los Angeles itself has arguably the pleasantest weather in America (shared with San Diego), but is actually an ugly, dark place. But to be fair to Los

Angeles, though I am familiar with San Diego in ways that I am not with Los Angeles, I can see San Diego, as well, as an alien. San Diego, often enough, is a place of genuine beauty, not fake beauty. San Diego is the good life, a genuinely nice experience. It shares some of Los Angeles' dark side (we have that gnawingly pleasant weather, and some of the traffic) and San Diego had (and has?) a relatively strong goth scene. But San Diego is a sleepy place, a kind of "last man" place. San Diego is more spiritually dangerous than Los Angeles, because in Los Angeles, you *know* something is wrong. But in San Diego, you feel like everything is right. The word "hedonism" sounds to some like cocaine and strippers on Sunset Strip -- a Los Angeles phenomenon -- but to me it sounds like a beautiful sunset at La Jolla Shores, or Coronado, or whatever other San Diego beach, that feeling of the "pacific" ocean calming you, quieting away the deeply personal side of you, drugging you with genuine psychological health. How can you really learn to love in San Diego, when it is at its "finest"? You have a better chance in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles is known for the film and music industries, and its container ports. San Diego is known for the military, and for craft beer and burritos and going to the beach. The World Famous San Diego Zoo is here as well.

The vulgar hedonism of Hollywood rock stars in the 1980s is probably too easily grown past. Also, the version of hedonism envisioned by transhumanists (for instance, discussed somewhat in *X-Risk*), while exciting and motivating to them, may seem sort of ridiculous and unnecessary to the average person. But San Diego, instead of radical hedonism represented by rock stars or transhumanists, represents normal hedonism, for normal people. If you want really good, human compatible experience, come to San Diego. Watch a sunset. Eat food from a taco shop. Drink a craft beer. Go surfing. Maybe stay home and watch a movie. Go check out a farmer's market on the weekend. Forget God. Lose your passion. Let go. Turn off the part of you that cares about anything outside of your lifestyle of normal humanity.

San Diego is the hedonism that normal people would choose, and already do choose, long before any advanced technology makes an Experience Machine possible. It may be the exact experience that people choose once they've tried all the "adventure programs of youth" that you can run on the Experience Machine. At the end -- our vision of heaven, I guess, will be San Diego, or culturally varied versions of it.

One San Diegan I knew lived in Germany for school, but came back to visit his parents in a neighborhood close to mine. He said that when he visited San Diego, he felt sadness. That was his alien view. I can connect with that -- the sadness of a beautiful sunset, all the people beautifully bedding down for one last night, as the dark settles in and they cease to exist.

San Diego says "look at things from the familiar view". Los Angeles says

"look at things from the alien view". I feel like I would have a much easier time discussing the content of this post in Los Angeles-as-Los Angeles. I feel it very difficult to talk about it in San Diego-as-San Diego. In Los Angeles, we can have the possibility of really being aware of weird things, like that if we give $5,000 to a charity, it could save someone's life, a totally meaningless and abstract behavior from the point of view of an ordinary human's life. But that weird sacrifice, from our perspective, is like a gift from heaven for the person who benefits, who gets to live 35 more years (up to life expectancy, at least). In Los Angeles, we can be aware that the familiar view, normality, human nature, themselves are horrors, which prevent people from giving to anyone outside their own familiar lives. In Los Angeles we may long for something other than "this", and perhaps even occasionally cry out to God. But San Diego is self-sufficient. I don't want to be too kind to Los Angeles -- I don't know that Los Angeles leads people to love God. But at least in a sense it is unstable. San Diego is more hedonically stable, is a lower-energy point of cultural development. You can become aware of God if you can see outside the totality of the experience-as-experience. You can become aware of persons as persons, as more than just experiences, if there is some outside to the hedonic moment. A perfect San Diego could exclude you from loving God as a person, as a real being, and you would have no way to motivate yourself to leave that perspective. It would be a perfect sunset at the end of a 10/10 day.

The truth is found in totality. So while I have presented the alien views of the two cities, to be accurate, one should remember their familiar views. Every person is an alien to us and family to us, and every collection of people is alien and familiar. Most aliens have some element of horror to them, and so do most people, though there are some aliens who are like cities of God.

Labels: #addiction, #drugs, #evil, #family, #geographic, #God, #goth, #horror, #Los Angeles, #love, #occult, #psychology, #San Diego, #spiritual danger, #truth

Running Software; Insecurity and Evil

%running-software-insecurity-and-evil

Tuesday, May 17, 2022

"You" can selflessly choose to become a "you" who selfishly desires the good. It's as though you choose to run software. You enter into the software with all of who you are, but ultimately it's something you chose to run, and maybe there are times where you become distant from that software and can face the choice once more, and unchoose it, or affirm it, consciously.

Sometimes we see people (or nations) doing evil. Why do they do that? Are they evil? (Aggressive, powerhungry, greedy, hateful.) Or is it because they are acting out of self-defense? (Out of fear, insecurity, weakness, desperation.) Sometimes an observer of them can make a case both ways.

Maybe what is going on is that the evil reality of them, who they really are, is choosing to install the insecure software, to justify its evil. Or maybe they aren't really evil, but their fears install the software of being evil. For instance, choosing to install the software of dehumanizing your opponents to allow you to do what you have to do to survive. Once your opponents are dehumanized, then it is natural to be evil to them. Or maybe they are simultaneously significantly evil and significantly insecure.

People can have significant evil in them and also significant non-evil (good, or amoral self-interest). But even purely evil people have to mind their own self-preservation. So they might act even more evil than they would just out of their own inherent evil, if you threaten their survival.

What's the right strategy with people like this? Are the people who seem evil to us often the people that we really understand? So, given cases in which we lack understanding, we bet -- either that our opponent is so evil that they will try to take over if given a chance, and we must "do what it takes to stop them", including threaten their self-preservation; or that they are not so evil and will content themselves with self-preservation if we leave them alone. Do we know what we're doing? We may think we do.

Perhaps this consideration of "software", insecurity, and evil is more often more usefully applied to ourselves, because of all people we know ourselves best. How often do we install "software" that justifies, motivates, or makes more feasible some kind of hostility (perhaps software of a kind of morality) primarily or significantly to serve our own self-preservation?

How often do we emphasize our neediness (run a supercharged self-preservation program) because we want to be greedy? How often do we install software for reasons other than the truth of what the software states or is based on?

Labels: #computers, #evil, #fear, #motivation, #politics, #psychology, #truth

Who do you love? / Who do you fear?

%who-do-you-love-who-do-you-fear

Wednesday, May 18, 2022

Sometimes I ask of myself "Who do you love?" when I am drawn toward something or someone other than God. Who am I putting first in my intentions and emotions? Who am I most committed to?

Sometimes I ask of myself "Who do you fear?" when I am afraid of some reality other than God. A reality might limit me, but I choose if the idea of a reality limits me, more than the reality itself does. What I fear is what I consider real. What I fear most is what I consider most real. So, who do I fear?

Labels: #fear, #God, #life choices, #love, #note

A Meaning of "Human Freedom"

%a-meaning-of-human-freedom

Wednesday, May 18, 2022

It's possible to ask what human freedom is.

Here's an answer:

To be free is to be yourself. Who you are is up to you to choose. What you choose is valid.

If you want to maximize your own freedom, then you want to be free for as long as possible. You don't want to die the second death. So, the way to maximize your freedom is to become fully in tune with God so that you don't have to die the second death. Otherwise, to maximize your freedom is to do/be whatever your heart tells you and whatever you set your heart to be.

Labels: #definition, #life choices, #politics, #what is a person?

Learning Languages; Indonesian

%learning-languages-indonesian

Thursday, May 19, 2022

I met someone on a pen pal site from Indonesia, and I got interested in learning more about that country. Then, I was having a hard time getting writing done one day and thought about learning Indonesian. So I went to the Indonesian Wikipedia and looked around. I looked up some of the words that looked interesting, and tried using the random article function to explore. I found that I was learning that way.

Now doing that, or similar things, is a little bit of a habit, maybe 20 minutes a day. Indonesian is an easy language to learn, I think. I've tried learning (in descending order of how far I got:) Spanish, German, and Russian before, all of them through some kind of "official language learning" thing (school, cassette tapes, Duolingo). I realize now that that spirit takes the fun out of learning, and that it's better to do something inexpertly over and over over a long time period than to do things well for a while and then give up. If you keep your love for something, you can go far. I like freely exploring "all knowledge" (Indonesian Wikipedia) rather than learning practical things I would need as a tourist, or grammar. I guess someday I'll end up learning those things somehow.

Indonesian and Spanish are both spoken in the developing world, which interests me. Indonesia is the fourth-most-populous country in the world. Could climate change (or war?) send refugees to where I live who speak Indonesian or Spanish? Or maybe I could spend time in Indonesia, where the official religions include Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (as well as Christianity). If I ever get to the point in my life where I want to focus on non-Christian religions, that might be a good place to go. Or maybe I could go to Tijuana, which could be a day trip for me where I live, and speak Spanish there, or find someone where I live whose main language is Spanish. (Or I could interact with those languages' social media worlds.)

A saying that I read in *The Circle Maker* by Mark Batterson is "you overestimate what you can do in a year but underestimate what you can do in ten years". I don't think I'll be fluent in Indonesian anytime soon.

How serious am I about learning Indonesian? I tried to quit learning, and decided not to, and then I felt the interest coming back on its own. This is a sign to me to consider myself really on the way to learning the language.

Labels: #culture, #education, #Indonesia, #Latin America, #life choices, #religion, #wisdom

Book Review Preview: Between Man and Man by Martin Buber

%book-review-preview-between-man-and-man

Sunday, May 22, 2022

See also the review for which this is the preview.

Continuing with the theme of Judaism, I have a copy of *Between Man and Man* (by Martin Buber) that I've been meaning to read sometime. Buber was a Jewish philosopher and probably the book is influenced by Judaism.

I'm not completely sure what the book is about, but I know it has something to do with education, which is the topic of some other books I want to review. It looks like it also has a discussion of "what is man?" (which has something to do with my question of "what is a person?") and an expansion of Buber's dialogue-based philosophy.

MSLN is most influenced by Berkeley. But Buber has probably had the next-most influence on it, such as that is. As such, it's possibly a good idea for me to examine Buber's themes of "dialogue", "I-thou vs. I-it", and so on as he tries to apply them to things outside the space (perhaps a garden) in which philosophies have their own existence. Maybe I don't want to go down all the paths Buber does.

Labels: #book review, #education, #Judaism, #Martin Buber, #philosophy, #what is a person?

Horror Math

%horror-math

Wednesday, May 25, 2022

Here is a Twitter thread that I wrote that I wanted to put on this blog:

> Has anyone made math that doesn't (always) resolve? E.g. X + -X that can't be made 0, but which is always X + -X.
>
> I got this idea from the horror of something that is simultaneously good and bad without resolving to a "shade of grey". (The horror of forcing two opposites into one thing without resolving them.) So it could be "horror math".
>
> I'm not sure it would be that useful, but I note that 2N/(4(X + -X)) resolves to N/(2(X + -X)) in horror math, while in regular math it resolves to "undefined".
>
> Since math is often talking about reality, there may be cases where X + -X talks about reality more accurately than reducing them down to 0. So they should be immune, or partially immune, to mathematical processing.

Labels: #definition, #horror, #math

National Adolescence

%national-adolescence

Wednesday, May 25, 2022

It used to be that everyone was children and parents. Then, one year, a precocious child got rid of his parents and entered adolescence. His capabilities grew and he was happy and free. The other parents (and many of the children) were horrified at his freedom. There are ways in which parents (and children) are more mature than adolescents. But because the bodies of the children craved to be adolescent, one by one they rejected their parents and were free, despite the attempts of some of the parents to control them to prevent the change.

It used to be that within the children there was the good child, who obeyed his parents, and the bad child, who disobeyed. But within the adolescents, all parts are equal, and all parts are valued. And between the different adolescents, all are equal, although some are much stronger than others. They create a brotherhood and sisterhood of adolescents, enjoying hanging out, taking drugs, having sex, doing graffiti, and playing loud music.

The parents and children live for all kinds of reasons, but the adolescents live, and always have lived, for pleasing themselves.

The adolescents increasingly hope, and the parents and children increasingly fear, that adolescence will conquer the world. That it's the final state of human development, and there will be no further maturing beyond that point.

Labels: #adolescence, #adulthood, #childhood, #culture, #family, #maturity, #parable, #politics

Probate and Divorce

%probate-and-divorce

Thursday, May 26, 2022

The two sisters were inheriting the mansion. The mansion had servants, cool dogs, huge TVs, fluffy beds, a bowling alley, a huge garden, a wet bar, and lots of other things like that. The mansion smelled good and was in a good neighborhood.

The two sisters disputed the mansion. Only one of them could own it and they refused to split it up. They fought over it in probate court, and every two to four years appealed to a higher court. And the court would change the decision. How sweet it was to be the one sister taking possession of the mansion, after two to four years living in some dingy apartment.

--

The husband and wife got a divorce. They fought in court over custody of the kids. They appealed the divorce court, and every so often the court reversed its decision. No matter who had the kids, the other one had to pay child support.

Labels: #childhood, #family, #parable, #politics

Benefits of Temptation; Risks of Anti-temptation

%benefits-of-temptation-risks-of-anti

Wednesday, June 1, 2022

Anti-temptations sound like unambiguously good things. They draw people toward God. How could anyone resist the appeal of God? But, they are risky.

Temptations are obviously bad, but can have a non-obvious benefit. When we are tempted, we can decide, out of our own personal will, to reject the temptation. Maybe we reject it in the moment by not acting on it. Or, after we give in, we reject it retrospectively by regretting giving in and turning back to God. The stronger the temptation, sometimes, the stronger the rejection of it. That rejection can harden our hearts against sin and drive us into loyalty to God. So actually temptation can enable willful people to get closer to God than they might without it. With their willfulness they reject the temptation to turn against God, and in so doing turn toward God more firmly, truly, and permanently.

If a willful person is exposed to anti-temptation, they might reject God, out of willfulness, as the opposite of what happens when exposed to temptation.

Someone exposed to anti-temptation might become "inoculated" to God, enjoying the pleasantness of the anti-temptation without connecting to the real person of God underneath. They also might only be able to love an appealing God, or appealingness itself in its divine mode.

When we feel good about God, we may be feeling good about a false image of God. So do we really love God? A true anti-temptation tries to connect us with the real God, but we may willfully misunderstand what the anti-temptation is talking about. It offers something real, but we missee it and thus refer, *de re*, to something else.

Also, when we are feeling good about God, we may make motions of dedication to him, and may offer a generous portion, perhaps 95% of our hearts to him. But for us to be saved, we need to give 100%. Having drawn so close to God with the 95% that we have given, perhaps we start to harden in that state, ignoring the 5% we keep away from dedication to him, and the 5%'s size and undedicated status can harden. A hardened 5% of sin is worse than a rough and obvious 50% or more of sin that we know is sin and is still uncommitted enough for us to change.

For these reasons (I think maybe in contradiction to what I might have said or implied earlier), "throwing anti-temptation at the problem" (like "throwing money at the problem") is imperfect and potentially dangerous. Anti-temptation is a valuable part of people's experiential diets, but temptation is also needed for many people. Maybe it's worth stressing that "anti-temptation can't replace *your* decision to come into tune with God."

Labels: #altruism, #God, #life choices, #love, #psychology, #valuing

Book Review Preview: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson

%book-review-preview-dr-jekyll-and-mr

Thursday, June 2, 2022

See also the review.

One thing I've been thinking about recently is how nations are and are not like individuals. We can mentalize nations as individuals, or as horses with riders, or as impersonal phenomena (maybe in other ways?).

When a president acts, does the nation act? Presidents come and go, like different personalities in someone with multiple personalities. An individual president can be evil. Do they make the whole nation -- all of its trends, cultures, emergent phenomena -- evil? We attack a whole nation to deal with an evil president. We might have discipline to not see the nation as being the same as the president. But maybe the president affects how we see the nation. A president (or other elites) can shape the nation they live in.

We are privy to our own conflicting thoughts and feelings. But when we see other people, we are not privy to theirs. All we see is their behavior. We mentalize a person within the behavior -- that is them. But we know from our inside view of ourselves that there is a distinction between the *I* and the different forces within us. It's like we are presidents of ourselves. We have some control over our body's behavior. But we are not identical with the body that behaves, even though that forms other people's view of us. Functionally, maybe, we are the body that behaves. And maybe if we are good presidents of ourselves, we rule over our conflicting thoughts and feelings better, to form a stronger, more coherent "nation".

That's one dimension of the question of "how do nations resemble individuals?" and I assume that there may be other dimensions. Does it make sense to look at nations using the tools of psychology? Are nations like people with borderline personality disorder, multiple personalities? Are there therapies to use on a nation that might produce more coherent "national psychologies"? Other questions, after those, might be "is it maybe a good thing that nations are incoherent or semicoherent?" or "what are the upsides of national incoherence or semicoherence?"

One story I've written recently (Two Personalities in the Body Politic) talks

somewhat about these issues and it is a takeoff on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. I don't remember in any detail what goes on in that book, but I can easily re-read it because it is short.

So, I intend to read it, through the lens of how it might possibly shed light on this question of "national psychology".

I think *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* might give insight on the ways in which temporary leaders of bodies of people might think about how to behave given that they won't always be in power. Also, how to think about nations that have within them radically different factions.

Labels: #mental health, #mental security, #politics, #psychology, #Robert Louis Stevenson, #what is a person?

Holiness from the Role You Play

%holiness-from-role-you-play

Sunday, June 5, 2022

You can fight your sins one by one, or, from another perspective, can try to train yourself out of bad behaviors one by one. If you don't have success, or if you find that you can't keep ahead of them (your focus on one of them means you can't focus on others which come back, perhaps), then maybe you need to take a different tack.

Humans are often actors and wear spirits and roles. Sometimes you have a choice of which spirit to take in, or role to play. You could take in the spirit of Smerdyakov, Dmitri, Ivan, or Alyosha. Or the role of "member in good standing of your society, political tribe, or family of origin or choice". You could try to take on the spirit of Jesus, or of Mary or Moses. Your behaviors will follow from the role you play, which is bound to the spirit of the character. In this way you can do greater good than by dealing with individual behaviors. (Or perhaps greater harm, depending on the role chosen.)

Labels: #habitus, #holiness, #Jesus, #literature, #maturity, #morality, #note, #social connection

Morality, or Self-Preservation?

%morality-or-self-preservation

Sunday, June 5, 2022

Epistemic status: I think the idea that follows might be worth pursuing, but I'm less sure about it than other things I post. I think it would be maybe useful in political discussions, in cases where there is time to deliberate. I guess it could be used on a more personal level as well. But I haven't thought through whether it would really be practical to implement.

I'm not sure the following is an exhaustive list, but I think that people can be motivated by: moral idealism, evil, and self-preservation.

If we are trying to justify our behavior, attitudes, and so on, we can't use evil -- we'll say that evil things are by definition unjustified and thus not grounds for justifying anything else.

So we're left with moral idealism and self-preservation. (Opening for objection: maybe there are other options?)

If that's the case, then we should have to declare how much of our behavior, attitudes, etc. are motivated by moral idealism and how much of them are motivated by self-preservation. If a given behavior or attitude is complex, which part of it is motivated by what, and for each individual part, if it is simple, what percentage "morally idealistic" is it versus "self-preservative".

Then, if we rely on moral idealism to justify ourselves, we need to cite which moral foundation we are using, and bind ourselves to the implications that follow from that moral foundation.

Arguably, self-preservation is only a valid reason to do things if self-preservation itself is grounded in a moral foundation. So maybe any proposed course of action involved in a serious decision needs to be morally justified. Perhaps moral idealism "sticks its neck out" as being moral more obviously than self-preservation. Self-preservation might not claim to be moral and evade notice. But strictly speaking, self-preservation also needs to be justified.

How can morality be valid if morality doesn't really exist (moral anti-realism)? And what would it take for something like morality to exist? What is the character of morality, what or who is it? What does it want (or "want")?

Labels: #metaethics, #morality, #politics, #psychology

Book Review: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson

%book-review-dr-jekyll-and-mr-hyde-by

Tuesday, June 7, 2022

See also the preview for this review.

My impression of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, having [when I had] just read it: It is useful to read to give emotional weight to the problem of humans' dual nature of good and evil, and to good and evil themselves. The last chapter ("Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case") gives more food for thought.

I noted there (in the book) that Jekyll initially wanted to separate the evil nature from the good in him. I think, looking at things from a society-wide or political level, we sometimes split parts of society off from us to be evil for us. Maybe we don't do this intentionally, or maybe we do on some level. Cops and military are exposed to evil and it corrupts some of them or gives them temptations most of us don't face which they then sometimes give in to. People who live in bad neighborhoods pay less in rent and thus can be paid less. So someone needs to keep the neighborhoods bad. Childhoods of abuse may cause people to earn less if they don't go to school. So they provide workers for low wage jobs. Corrupt and authoritarian foreign regimes keep their societies dysfunctional so that they don't develop too much -- keeping wages lower. Building factories in least-developed countries makes those countries wealthier. So we need some dysfunctional countries to wait in the wings when standards of living rise in the countries we have developed.

Money can't buy everything. A person has to convert that money into a good or service, and certain occupations are more often staffed by people who have a certain political persuasion. If you are a certain kind of Democrat, you may despise capitalism, and that may not make you a good person to go into business. If you are a certain kind of Republican, you may despise cultural refinement, and that may not make you a good person to make art or entertainment. The Republican has the kids watch Disney because the kids will drive her crazy otherwise, and the Democrat over and over buys things from capitalist people because he would live in material want otherwise. So it looks like we need the mental software, or house, of Democrat thinking, to spiritually nourish the Democrat so he can

make his entertainment, and the mental software, or house, of Republican thinking, to spiritually nourish the Republican so she can run her business. If that's true, then no matter how much the Republican detests Democrat culture, or vice versa, they need that each other's cultures exist, and they need people to believe in those horrible Republican, or Democrat, values.

Does this mean that there is no such thing as evil, or that evil is necessary and thus not practically recommended-against? Which would you rather, to live a long and healthy life in an evil land, or to be poor and unhappy in a virtuous land? What if the good life requires that we all participate in evil, either directly, or by proxy? One could say that everything that exists is inextricably intertwined with everything else, and that therefore evil is necessary for what is good, and so we should do nothing about it, and cease to regard it as evil.

No, it's possible for there to be real evil. I don't want to say that the Republicans are evil and the Democrats good, or vice versa, because I have vowed to be apolitical, but in principle, one of them might be more right than the other. Maybe they both have issues, but a third as yet unarticulated political culture basically doesn't. This third culture might work just as well for business owners as for creative people, or whatever other stereotypically Republican and Democrat occupations one would want to mention. There could be a morally better culture that also unifies people politically, and we can have both political harmony and moral progress / purification in one new status quo. Likewise with the examples of the low wages, maybe those of us with greater wealth and life-situation-resources could simply pay more for what we consume, helping other people to have higher wages. Someone could somehow help people leave their abusive spouses or parents, reform corrupt and authoritarian governments, and we would all pay more for our cheapest goods and it would be fine because we would be well-off ourselves. People who currently have a hard time affording those cheapest goods could be helped by those who have extra resources. Again, things could just be better.

But, that change can't happen immediately, and in the meantime, evil props up good. Sometimes we find it convenient to prop up good with evil and then forget that we benefit from evil, and become morally outraged with evil that we actually need in an important sense. If we're willing to do the work that the evil people do for us, maybe we can reduce the evil. Otherwise we are constituted, in some sense, by something we disown.

Is the status quo fragile, or anti-fragile? If we stress it, will it break? Or will it grow into something better? If we think it's 100% fragile, we will be unable to practically favor morality (change things into something better), and soon, we will fiducially or even epistemically stop regarding evil as evil. A fragile status quo then destroys consciousness of morality. Or, people who are afraid of breaking a fragile status quo do. But if the status quo is anti-fragile, then moral consciousness can be rewarded with societal

success / health / sustainability. And moral consciousness makes sense if we are willing to risk breaking the status quo in the attempt to make it really good.

(Being revolutionary is not always a good idea. Breaking the status quo is a bad thing in itself and can make people conservative, feel like the world is fragile, so they then try to extinguish moral consciousness. But if you have zero sense that it's okay to risk the status quo, in theory, you'll never feel like it's okay to try to change it -- unless, maybe, the proposed changes are very clearly safe to make. And adopting that level of caution may be costly, and sometimes not worth it.)

In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by the evil being separate, it is freed to become more evil. When we separate out and segregate the evil or that which bears evil, it intensifies. Bad neighborhoods and bad cop cultures both become worse. Prisons can intensify the evil of those sent to be punished by those prisons' evil.

Does this mean we should keep all evil mixed in with all good? It seems like maybe Stevenson was trying to say that Jekyll, who all his life struggled with his dual moral nature, needed to keep struggling, with his evil stuck in his own self-concept, and that when he split it off into Hyde, he ended up, when Jekyll, still having the dual nature, plus there was the time he was Hyde and was purely evil. There may be some wisdom in that. We start to make a kind of devil's bargain, perhaps, when we outsource evil to someone else and stop struggling with it ourselves, when we have someone else face temptations for us.

Nevertheless, the way of civilization and progress ("progress" used in a descriptive and not normative sense) is for us to cleanly separate the good from the bad, so that we can be more established. I think that the ordinary person can't handle the worst levels of evil (or amoral behavioral threat, as from some kinds of mental illness). But if we have discipline, maybe we will resist cleaning up society too much, so that ordinary people still have to deal with evil people to some extent and we have to face the temptations faced by those who are professionals in dealing with evil. I don't know how practical this idea is, and I do not relish the thought of having to deal with evil people myself, or with having a job like that of a police officer or prison guard, but maybe as frightful as that sounds to me, it would be better for me to face those kinds of roles -- at least, if nothing else, to face the mild or moderate evil in the world that perhaps is within my reach, to help prevent it from growing to a size unmanageable to me by my (or somebody's) neglect.

I think the book, particularly the last chapter, is good for those who are thinking about holiness and morality. I think the book, overall, is stronger as a source of thoughts about morality on a personal level, rather than the political. But right now, I'm more interested in the political or society-wide

angle to it.

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Now I will consider what I wrote in my preview of this review.

There, I wrote

> I think *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* might give insight on the ways in which temporary leaders of bodies of people might think about how to behave given that they won't always be in power. Also, how to think about nations that have within them radically different factions.

There was some connection in the book to that question of providing for when you're not in power. Jekyll sometimes set things up so that when he was Hyde, Hyde wouldn't ruin things. I imagine that in liberal democracies, governments think about the fact that they will be replaced by people who don't like their agenda (the opposition). That might be an interesting area to read about if I come upon a source.

One thing that maybe could be pointed out from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is that I know that Jekyll provides for the fact that he will become Hyde, and I vaguely feel like Hyde provides for the fact that he will become Jekyll. This asymmetry to how I remember this suggests the thought that Jekyll was the more responsible of the two and therefore did more of the providing for the reality of Hyde, and had more of a concept that he was responsible for what Hyde did. So, suppose there is a Faction A and Faction B in a country, and Faction A is more responsible, both in the sense of interfering more in / providing for the existence of, and feeling more accountable for, Faction B, than Faction B does of Faction A. Metapolitics (views on the fact that there are politics, factions, etc.) is part of political culture. A move in Faction A vs. Faction B politics might be in denying that there is an overall nation that both are part of, weakening this sense of responsibility. An amoral or evil Faction B (Hyde-like) might have a sort of "youthful strength" by ignoring responsibility. Possibly Faction A's attempts to take care of what Faction B will likely do could end up doing more harm than good sometimes, and Faction B can "shine by comparison" by not messing up that way.

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On a personal note, I find that I have different moods, because I have bipolar disorder. So this book, and thinking about it, thematizes the question of how I might provide for myself when I'm in a maybe radically different mood.

Labels: #altruism, #civilization, #economics, #evil, #politics, #psychology, #Robert Louis Stevenson

Habitus; Misremembering

%habitus

Thursday, June 9, 2022

I watched an Alice Cappelle video (unfortunately, I don't remember which one) in which she related something to the concept of "habitus", from sociology.

I don't always faithfully remember what I pick up from other people, but sometimes prefer to use my own memory or misremembering of a concept in my own writing, as though my writing is my own world suited to my own mind, the way the misremembering is. I suspect I have done this with a similar concept, sarkar, which I got from a B. K. Shivani video (unfortunately, I also don't remember which one).

My memory of "habitus" is that it is the way in which the people around you in a given social setting (peer group, scene, organization, nation) condition you to play your role in it -- and, if you play your role, you are conditioning the other people in that social setting to play their role.

The conditioning could be a mindset, vibe, or sarkar. Or could come from having to be responsible for certain things, or meeting certain expectations. People might not be intentional when they condition you into your/their habitus -- probably often or usually aren't.

Habitus is like a reciprocating engine, which vibrates at a certain frequency and is self-sustaining. Maybe habitus is the sarkar, or part of the sarkar, of groups of people.

The instinct to respond (which sometimes is "responsibility" as we normally term it, or it could be something else, like a self-interested hunger) is, perhaps, what makes habitus run. So bad societies can run on bad responsibility.

Labels: #definition, #habitus, #psychology, #social connection, #sociology

Personal Incoherence From Relentless Habitus

%personal-incoherence-from-relentless

Thursday, June 9, 2022

One possible way that people can have multiple personalities is that for some part of their lives they develop their authentic view of the world -- just them and truth. Then, they maintain that authentic view in a container within them, while being surrounded by people who push the habitus of the social environment on them. But, to be in that container keeps them shut off from people around them. Sometimes this is sustainable, but limits their ability to speak to other people. Other times it is unsustainable. The ocean waves of convention beat them down until the container breaks. Then, they start identifying with their role in the habitus, but also with their authentic view that still remains. They switch between identifying with one and the other, and thus become incoherent on the level of the *I*. Before, they knew who they were and saw the role they played in society as a role. But now, the "actor" begins to lose their distinction from the role they play.

People in exile or captivity may struggle to remain themselves, and sometimes become incoherent.

Labels: #exile/captivity, #habitus, #note, #psychology, #sociology

Real Forgiveness and Real Moral Patience

%real-forgiveness-and-real-moral-patience

Tuesday, June 14, 2022

I've heard it said (something like) that real forgiveness is not when you say that nothing wrong was done in the first place, but when you see that something wrong was done to you, but you don't hold it against the person who wronged you. Forgiveness doesn't change the past, or change right and wrong. Maybe what it does is allows a person, who wronged you in the past, to have become a new person, whom you no longer see as the person who wronged you. The person you forgive is the living person, even if the person who wronged you, whom you see in your memory, will always be a horror there.

(Can you forgive someone but still not trust them? Presumably you don't trust them because you don't want to risk the possibility that they haven't changed, or haven't changed for the better. Perhaps in one sense you can still release them from their past deeds, no longer see them as the same person, while still being wary of their possible or certain present character.)

"Moral impatience" could be something like the seeing of horror in the present world and the feeling that it should not be that way, that people should not be as they are. Impatience can be virtuous, just like anger, but both are dangerous. Impatience, like anger, is hard to hold in yourself. If it can lead to a good action, it is functional, but if held in oneself, can burn a person out.

So patience is what is called for -- but, there is a patience which is like the false forgiveness which says that nothing wrong was done in the first place, which simply ceases to see the moral truth. If you back off seeing the moral truth enough, you sink into bad comfort, or even despair. You somehow become incapable of doing the good you're really strong enough to do.

So the patience that is called for is like true forgiveness. Somehow you have to maintain some kind of psychological structure that can hold two opposites in you at once, to address the paradox of willingly waiting through what should not be. Perhaps two programs running in your brain simultaneously. One being a high-quality awareness of evil which calls you to fight evil (and thus to act when possible), and have an emotional witness to what should not be, as much as you can sustain. And the other

being a high-quality ability to wait -- to watch and wait, and peacefully wait to speak.

Labels: #exile%2Fcaptivity, #family, #forgiveness, #horror, #morality, #patience, #psychology

The Truth of Evil Implies Action

%the-truth-of-evil-implies-action

Tuesday, June 14, 2022

To see the truth of evil is to see that it should not be. This implies action. (Similarly to see the truth of good is to see that it should be, which may also imply action.) So you can't see the moral truth without acting (or willing to act, in case you don't have the ability to act). If you can choose to have the ability to act, or to act more effectively, doing so follows from seeing the moral truth.

We have reactions to evil things which are not necessarily the recognition of the wrongness of them. Perhaps evil makes us sad or feel powerless. To look on evil, when it makes us feel too powerless to will that it not be, is not to see that it should not be.

Labels: #altruism, #morality, #note

Book Review: In the Shadow of the Banyan by Vaddey Ratner

%book-review-in-shadow-of-banyan-by

Thursday, June 16, 2022

I didn't plan on writing a review of *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (by Vaddey Ratner). I read it to pass the time, rather than as part of some kind of study or writing program. But now that I've read it, I have some thoughts about it.

The book is a novel, based on the author's actual experiences as a young girl, member of the Cambodian royal family during the time of the Khmer Rouge, an anti-royal, anti-Western Communist revolutionary group that killed millions of Cambodians through purges, overwork, and underfeeding. She journeys from a relatively sheltered situation at the beginning of the book (a child who lives in the imaginal and familiar world of family, stories, Asian Buddhism, Hindu myths), through a series of progressively darker dislocations and losses, until she is struck dumb. She manages to survive (mirroring the author's survival) and make it out of Cambodia with her mother.

I thought of not writing this review, because the thoughts that I had feel like ones that are underdeveloped at this point, or that might not fit what I want to write about in this chapter of the blog, but something insists in me that I do write, and maybe I'm writing notes for later writing that explores the following subjects in more detail.

I identified with three themes that I saw in the book: The imaginal world, the Revolution, and the cross.

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The spiritual/imaginal world was something that the narrator's grandmother, and the narrator, both spent a fair amount of time in, as though when we are new to the world, or not long left in it, we are better able to see things like *tevodas* (angel-like beings), ghosts, or connect with the story of Indra, with mythical explanations for things. I don't remember there being any moments where the imaginal world appeared in the sensory world (the "real" world), but the grandmother and narrator were able to see it. I think that there is a part of me that lives in that world -- in fact, that's the world of philosophy, though it often presents itself

prosaically and mechanistically. And, I sometimes feel (sometimes too much) that I belong there more than I do in the sensory world. I'm not sure I have much of a point to make in bringing this up, but that was my reaction.

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The Revolution spoke to me, because of how much the revolutionaries were into willing and working. The book shows how some of them were heartless, psychopathic, and corrupt, and this makes me think that the revolutionary spirit is dangerous.

I know that some of my past writing (notably *How Can We Love?*) could, perhaps in its emphasis, if not its text read carefully, be considered a broadly left- (or "revolutionary humanist"-) leaning thing. It has some of the spirit of Revolution, even though it says on the surface of it things that go against Revolution. I think I would say now that the book is flawed, to the extent that it lends itself to a revolutionary humanist reading, because that was not my intention. But it is a somewhat revolutionary thing and that gives me one reason to want to think about the dangers of the revolutionary spirit.

In the Shadow of the Banyan mentions that there was a split within the Khmer Rouge between the Cause and the Party. The Cause was idealistic, but the Party took over. Causes tend to draw on one kind of energy, that of ordinary people, non-psychopathic human desires. But parties can focus on their own well-being, rather than devoting themselves fully to a cause, and outcompete groups still into causes. This is a pessimistic thought, and it's worth noting that there are a lot of places where parties exist but do not wipe out idealism. (Moloch seems like an undefeatable dynamic, but for some reason it doesn't always rule.) There is a tension between Party and Cause tendencies in a society, and it's wise to be concerned about how any cause could turn into a purely partisan thing.

I know that the revolutionary spirit is dangerous, but, as long as the status quo needs to be changed in some way, it is necessary, and perhaps revolutions, or the spirit of revolutions, is needed to maintain the status quo (if you don't fix things, you decay, and some fixing is "microrevolutionary"). A Communist rejoinder to a book speaking of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge might be "fair enough, they were corrupt and captured by psychopathy, and the empowerment of the corruption and psychopathy was enabled by the revolutionary spirit, but you should also do a calculation, alongside that of the death toll from the Khmer Rouge, of the lives lost due to the corruption and psychopathy that prevents capitalist society from doing the most it's really capable of doing to help the poor". (This sounds like something an effective altruist or EA-type person might try to calculate, or already has.) It may turn out to be the case that revolutionary Communism always turns out to be worse for

people, but capitalism (or "capitalism+" (plus civil society? the state?)) that isn't doing its best also (less visibly) has blood on its hands.

As is often the case, formulas are dangerous. If you're into Communism or capitalism, you need to be into the good version of that, because the bad version is as bad as the ideology you reject, or perhaps worse.

Should we think in terms of "blood on people's hands"? I think there is an awful truth to it. The moral truth is something that, when comprehended, causes people to do the moral thing. Is it perhaps misleading to talk about "blood on people's hands", is that a deceptive truth? Perhaps for some people, it is deceptive, and for others, it is basically non-misleading. I think that we gaze at the harshest moral truths and then walk away from them to do our relaxed versions of good. (I think that the Drowning Child Illustration is one of the harshest moral truths and generally EAs walk away from it to do their relaxed version of good, as much as that relaxed version of good might burn them out.) If we never gazed, we might never change into the much more mundane, if still countercultural, versions of ourselves that live in the shadow of the gaze.

I try to focus on saying what's true (because I'm a writer, and I feel like that's my "professional" responsibility). I don't think that the Khmer Rouge's worldview is correct, as much as they might be on to something when they see the moral truth of people held down by the ruling classes, or suffering or dying prematurely. For instance, this life is not the limit of our existence, as they thought, and so purity is something that is not desperately urgent. Purity is something that is necessary, and will come in its time -- the sooner the better, but not desperately soon. I think that MSLN / New Wine System-descended thinking is good for addressing both revolutionary humanism and traditional evangelical religion in their crazily desperate (and on their view, completely necessary) sense that they have to do radical good (on a societal and personal level) NOW, that time is running out for people who must get the essential good (a nice life, or conversion to Christianity) in this life, with death coming all-too-soon.

I understand that the Khmer Rouge, as Communists, were atheists. I believe that God exists, and if I'm correct in that belief, then the emphasis on human well-being found in Communism (as well as in other forms of humanism) could easily be misguided if it ignores God, how our relationships to God are the most fundamental field of altruism. Much of what revolutionary (or microrevolutionary) humanists want to achieve is somewhat orthogonal to people's relationships to God and may not be as valuable, necessary, or urgent as it seems. Making things better from an atheistic standpoint could, in some cases, be dangerous or harmful from a theistic standpoint.

I feel a strong momentum in the direction of secular humanist altruism. For instance, it's relatively easy for me to feel a sense of outrage, or

something like that, at things like physical poverty. I think I am somewhat wired to responding to the vivid, loud, and obvious, as I suppose most of us are. The habit of wanting to remove suffering or prolong life, in this life, is not the worst habit. But I have to remember that there's more to the truth than this life.

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Finally, I saw the cross in Ratner's/the narrator's experience. Not that she pursued the cross, although her father did in a fairly obvious way, but in that she underwent the cross. There was a moment toward the end where, to me, it seemed like the narrator died inside in a somewhat good way, and thenceforth had nothing to lose, and little (or less) to fear. (See chapter 29, pp. 295 - 296 in first hardcover edition.) That is one dimension of undergoing the cross, that it pushes us to the point that in some sense we are okay with dying or our death (maybe this is something I can validly connect to the moment in the novel). We are made to be willing to die by being forced close to death, and having "died", we are free. Maybe we have some free will in the matter? I'm not sure, but the narrator was given a gift at that moment of "survivable death" (again, if I'm reading this right). I may want to look at *In the Shadow of the Banyan* when I someday write a proper book on the cross.

Labels: #altruism, #atheism, #book review, #Buddhism, #capitalism, #Christianity, #imagination, #leftism, #morality, #politics, #religion, #spiritual

Structure and Change

%structure-and-change

Thursday, June 16, 2022

Sometimes, I have idly thought about what I would do if I were president. I think the last time I thought about this much, I decided I would run on a platform of keeping everything the same, except making high-expected-value changes aimed at a long-term payoff. For instance, investing in programs to seed civil society, or mental health education and training in public schools (and/or teaching young people how to deal with *life* and not just numbers and words), and probably other things I can't remember now.

Here we see a duality of "structure" and "change". The numerous possibly somewhat misguided or even maybe corrupt government tendencies and programs are the "structure" which keeps things the same and helps keep them from falling apart. Then, whatever creative things I want to do to make things better in the long-term, are the "change" that one would hope would make my hypothetical presidency worth it -- going beyond the mean.

I think about churches, and how sometimes they are good at finding people to fill the role of "structure", but in some cases, they don't find people who are oriented toward change. "Change" in a church is not just "congregational vision" where the church tries to do things that look kind of like when businesses or nations try to change, or what activists are going for when they protest, but rather also disciple-making -- encouraging, promoting, modeling-for-imitation, etc. holiness, -- which is change in the individual's life.

People in an individual's life can be structure, change, or perhaps a mixture of the two.

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There is a connection between creativity and "change", and between technical proficiency and "structure". You can be technically proficient and lack inspiration, and also you can work for structure without inspiration. But (generally, or even always) when you work for change and creativity, you need inspiration to be successful, or even to attempt to do anything. So it might be useful for those who pursue change to pursue creativity, so that through creativity, they can get connected to inspiration. Or, to ask God for a spirit, for the same purpose.

Labels: #church, #civilization, #creativity, #definition, #education, #holiness, #Holy Spirit, #maturity, #politics

Immaturity, Sin, and Family

%immaturity-sin-and-family

Thursday, June 16, 2022

See also Is Holiness the End of Childhood?.

When people are children, they are both immature (or "childish") and child-like. Sometimes when people are adults, they are immature. Perhaps some adults can be child-like.

Immaturity is what is undesirable in children, that they are supposed to grow out of. Emotional neediness, thoughtless irresponsibility, and perhaps other traits are not necessarily sinful, but they are things that life tends to push you to give up so that you can live it effectively. Immaturity also includes the sinful habits that children seem to naturally develop (in what they are) and whatever extent to which they themselves choose or deeply prefer those habits (which is sin in who they are).

Immature people also don't fully understand what they're doing. In this, they may be held to a lower standard than adults. For instance, a little girl might tell lies that get her out of trouble. She doesn't really get the full consequences of being a liar, how that can ripple out through her whole life. So her parents might not look at her as a disturbing person, just an immature person. They might try to turn her away from her lying behavior, but not come down harshly on her. But, imagining an adult daughter, who lies just as assiduously to get out of trouble, we might expect her parents to perhaps want to get as far away from her as they can, perhaps functionally or even officially disowning her. They might be offended by her dishonesty, find it shameful, or simply not trust her so much that they can't have her in their lives, living out the potentially loaded parent-child dynamic.

If you don't fully understand what you're doing, are you still sinning when you do things like lie for your own gain? To some extent you are. It's dangerous for five-year-olds to sin, even with their relatively innocent minds, because any sin is dangerous. To choose to sin involves preferring something that keeps you from being in tune with God 100%, and if you harden on that preference, you will reject God.

Fortunately, five-year-olds grow up so that they can understand and turn away from sin. As they grow, their capacities to understand and will things grow, along with their developing brains and understandings of the world, and who they are grows to inhabit these new capacities. Some people, perhaps the developmentally disabled, or the congenitally innocent, don't develop all of these capacities in this life. I assume that in the Millennium,

they are given new bodies / brains that can understand sufficiently for them to deal with whatever sin is in them. But, for those who do have the capacities, to not use them is a choice, and a dangerous choice. If we prefer to be immature in order to avoid dealing with sin, maybe we love sin in some way. Also, if we do not inhabit our full capacities, our love of God may be shallow, because we are not establishing our whole beings in loving him (loving with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength).

Sometimes choosing a role automatically inclines you to a whole set of behaviors. You can try to take on the role of being a child, or your younger self, and this may necessarily give you both child-like and immature traits. Some people may have to put their younger self in the past, even at the risk of losing some of the good and beautiful child-like traits, but some may not. One would hope that those who love childhood could pick apart the immaturity from their own child-likeness and could adopt the role of child or their younger self without getting into immaturity, which can lead to sin, or is sin in itself.

To the extent that family is a space in which immaturity is tolerated, it can be spiritually dangerous. It is more gratuitously dangerous if it encourages immaturity. People need slack to grow, and to an extent, they have to go at their own pace. So tolerating immaturity is a kind of necessary evil. But encouraging it is an unnecessary evil. Families include everyone and in a sense travel at the pace of the least-developed member. People like to be in families, but if Family conquered the world, it would be spiritually dangerous. There has to be something outside family and being in families for us to become holy. Families index themselves to their children, where those children are, in order to protect, nurture, and include them, but there needs to be some thing or things outside of Family that are indexed to the truth.

Perhaps Truth and Family coincide if each are properly understood. In order to be protected, nurtured, and included for all eternity, children must someday come into tune with God. We might think that the truth recommends including everyone in the family of God.

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[17 June 2022: I wrote this section mistakenly, having not re-read my *X-Risk* review before writing. In the review, the "silly" thing is the prospect of humans modifying themselves to take satisfaction in (/ caring about) the outputs of the process of "piling up art, science, games", which conveniently happen to be things our civilization can crank out. Art, games, and science themselves are not necessarily considered "silly" or "cheap".]

[I should take this as a lesson to be more careful when I write, but I do still like the thinking in this section, though it came about out of a mistake.]

[Art and games (and, I suppose, science) are not silly and cheap when they help us survive, or grow up. Also they are not cheap when they are not wealth. Wealth is what makes us rich, not in the sense of "wealth is a thing we sell to make lots of money which makes us rich", but in the sense of what makes us rich to possess it or participate in it ourselves. Full-grown love could be considered wealth. "I'm becoming rich off of video games" or "art" or even "cool scientific discoveries" is like having a lot of candy or eating a lot of candy. Even "I'm becoming rich off of love" is like eating a lot of candy -- immature love, or fake love, or love which is just a form of pleasure. But full-grown love really does make you rich, and it's appropriate to think of it as wealth.]

This subject makes me think of my review of *X-Risk*. I attacked aspects of transhumanism on the grounds that they were childish, but I realize that to attack childishness can simultaneously attack childlikeness. Transhumanists who want a future of 10^100 art and game units may simply be childlike, overcome by the wonder of fun, beauty, and large numbers. As I write this, I feel like I'm making fun of transhumanists, like I still haven't learned not to be harsh or even disrespectful of transhumanist (adult) children, of the child in them.

Because (adult) transhumanists are adults, I think that in a way, they can handle being made fun of or treated harshly. But even adults can be damaged by words. I don't want to take back my enmity with a certain kind of transhumanism, or the point I wanted to make that there's something cheap or silly about its goals. But children have the seriousness and the innocence to not be cheap or silly in their relations to things that are in some sense lacking. When I was a boy, I played with Legos, little pieces of plastic. The Legos could express my imagination, but what I made by way of instantiating my imaginings were structures that were too small for me to live in -- like an elaborate submarine, too small to be in, that would have filled up with water undersea. When I played with Legos, I did so with focus and absorption, not condescending when I played. Perhaps transhumanists are childlike and thus serious and innocent in their love of such lacking things as pleasure, fun, and beauty. I think a thing is fundamentally what God makes of it, and part of what he sees in something has to do with how it is seen by his different children and what they need, and so maybe childlike transhumanists add something pure to the cheapness and silliness of those forms of wealth, in comparison to full-grown love.

But, again, transhumanists are also adults and have an adult side to them. Some of them, by how hard they work, show that they are people who can value things even when those things bring them pain, tedium, and ugliness. They have the capacity for full-grown love, and not just childlike love, or childish pseudo-love. As I think about the childlike and childish people who seem to surround me, and I think of the value of childlikeness,

I can see that perhaps in the future there may be some reason for there to be art and games in great profusion in order to impress childlike people with large numbers. However, I think that it is dangerous for any child who has an adult side to not exercise that adult side. We need to love with all of our beings, and to learn to really love. By doing so we can really be both child-like, and good adults. Otherwise, we are immature or even evil adults, who do not fully love and truly value, whom God cannot live with forever.

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12 September 2023: I think a child who really loves would be happy with one work of art, or one favorite game, or one scientific discovery. They would really connect with that thing and feel feelings of love toward it. So maybe in the ideal future, we should looking to maximize that tendency, and thus not need a huge pile of art, games, and scientific discoveries. So, to try to address what I remember of *X-Risk*, I would say that a booster for X-risk prevention could say "someday we can really learn to love, as long as we don't get wiped out by an X-risk".

Labels: #childhood, #family, #futurism, #holiness, #maturity, #morality, #overcoming sin

Popular Songs (Indonesian); Book Review Preview: Creative Destruction by Tyler Cowen

%popular-songs-indonesian-book-review

Tuesday, June 21, 2022

See also the review of Creative Destruction.

The first Indonesian song I'm aware of having heard was a MIDI of "Es Lilin". I was really impressed by it, mainly by an instrumental line that maybe was composed by the MIDI programmer. Or maybe they got it from someone's rendition. "Es Lilin" (I think) is a traditional song. It's about a popsicle -- a poetic translation of "es lilin" is "ice candle", but that's the word for "popsicle". I don't know what else the song is about, but I intend to try to translate the lyrics if I can, and discuss them in the follow-up to this post.

(I used to listen to MIDIs back at a certain era of my life, which was when we only had dial-up at home and I didn't have money to buy very many CDs, junior high or early high school. I didn't want to pirate music.)

I took a gamelan class in college of which I absorbed fairly little, although I do play a mallet percussion instrument and there are a lot of metallophones in gamelan. I remember the instructor, who I think was a fan of Indonesia, mentioning something about "Es Lilin".

When I became interested in Indonesia a few months ago, I thought to look up "Es Lilin". The versions I found didn't have the instrumental part that had stood out to me when I was younger. But it's still a good song. Here is Nining Meida's rendition, from her album *Kalangkang*:

{{Embedded YouTube video titled **Es Lilin - Nining Meida** from the channel **Sundari Soekotjo**}}

"Kalangkang", the title track on that album, to me sounds like a darkly mysterious song. "Dark" can have different meanings in aesthetics. There's "depressing" dark, "horror" dark, "evil" dark, "sad" dark, probably others -- these being the Western dark vibes, to be found in goth and metal among other places. But in Asia, there are other dark vibes, in addition:

"midnight" dark (like with midnight ragas), and ... whatever is going on in "Kalangkang". I don't feel like Asia's dark vibes are as close to "I'm going to die or have my being violated by evil" as the Western dark vibes. I'm not sure exactly what "midnight" means in all of Indian or Southeast Asian music, so they might include what I see in midnight, but I see there "presence before God", "quiet", "being in emotion", "being by yourself", "being outside of time". (Incidentally, I think Jewish music has its own take on midnight which I think includes "presence before God", at least I hear that in this song, at some points.) "Kalangkang"'s "verse" sounds like an invitation to a mystery -- but that's not having any idea what the lyrics are about.

{{Embedded YouTube video titled **NINING MEIDA - KALANGKANG** from the channel **sangkurian99**}}

Another song from *Kalangkang* is "Anjeun". I translated a few words from "Anjeun" that I remember. The title means "you". Indonesia has a lot of languages, and Indonesian is mostly a second language for Indonesians. They first learn a language native to whatever ethnic group they are part of. Some, or all, of *Kalangkang* is in Sundanese. (Fortunately there is an online translator for Sundanese.)

I suspect that "Anjeun" is a very sweet love song. I would normally find such sweetness hard to take, at least from Western songs. And I wonder if Indonesians find "Anjeun" to be too sweet. But to me it sounds innocent-enough to have in it the sweetness. Or perhaps "uncandylike" enough -- like it's sweet but not sugary. I don't know if that impression will survive a translation of the lyrics.

{{Embedded YouTube video titled **Anjeun** from the channel **Nining Meida - Topic**}}

A karaoke version.

Speaking of love songs, while looking around random pages on Indonesian Wikipedia, I found the page for Efek Rumah Kaca ("C" is pronounced "tsh" in Indonesian, and I think maybe in all Indonesian languages). They made a song called "Cinta Melulu" which means "Only Love" / "Always Love". I was interested in it because on the English Wikipedia page for the band, it sounded like it was about how the Indonesian music scene/industry was being overwhelmed with love songs, as though somehow Indonesia was not a place already overwhelmed with love songs. But then I tried translating the lyrics and it made me think that ERK was really lamenting that there were too many bad love songs. And checking the source for the English Wikipedia page, it looks like that's what was really meant by that source.

Thinking of Indonesia as a place where for some reason they didn't have very many love songs, and "now" (in early 2000s, when "Cinta Melulu" was

written), there was a trend toward them, made me think "is this evidence of a Westernization of Indonesian culture? We were overwhelmed by love songs back in the 1960s". I do see evidence of Westernization in Indonesian music -- Sundanese pop like Nining Meida does sound like a mix between Western pop (most obviously in the production) and traditional Asian music, and ERK sounds even more like Western music and even less like traditional Asian music, at least in "Cinta Melulu". But no, as I think about it, I'm going to guess that Indonesia has had love songs for a long time, like as far back as the 1980s when Nining Meida was making *Kalangkang*. It could turn out that "Es Lilin" is a love song and not a childhood song.

{{Embedded YouTube video titled **Efek Rumah Kaca - Cinta Melulu (lirik)** from the channel **Sandi Hermana**}}

I think I wish that cultures could be radically different from my own, and in my naivety I could suppose that different cultures in the world were radically different from my own. I know that love in some form is part of I would assume every non-monastic culture, and monks and nuns were first children as part of the world of family at least to some extent, but while the basics of human existence have to be just about or exactly the same everywhere, we don't have to talk about all of those basic phenomena. The world of what we talk about, about what we choose to bring up, examine, celebrate, meditate on, be horrified by, protest, etc. is to some extent up to us.

A culture that talks about everything literally as it observes it might tend toward so-called "Western" culture.

(Not so much "literal" in a "scientific" / possibly Humean or phenomenological way where we dissect our experiences and see them in a non-personal way -- as "pure" objects apart from us -- because that's not how we observe things most of the time; but more in a naive, lived life, firsthand way, as *we* experience / observe things. I guess this "literal" is one which is like seeing everything on your desk that's in front of you (no microscope needed, no rifling through the pages of closed books), or every emotion that goes through you (not scrutinizing them, nor even letting them pass by you in a "mindful" way, if they really are your emotions and part of you), or develops takes on the subjects raised by each day's experience (naive takes, or if you really feel like it, sophisticated ones); without passing over an object on the desk, or an emotion that passes through you, or a day's experience in your life. I guess like with how reason evolves out of rigorous common sense, this "literal" observantness of "seeing everything on your desk" could turn into something philosophical (Humean, phenomenological, etc.). But there's a difference between more rigorously or even extremely scientific observation of the level of Hume or Husserl, and proto-scientific observation, and while there is probably a continuum between the two (I assume that, not having

thought this through), there might be a clear difference between the two, like that between a puddle and a lake which is big enough to have waves.)

I find persuasive, whether I should or not, Scott Alexander's observation that what we call Western culture in terms of "Westernization" is really not inherently Western and is more like "appetite-following culture" or "hewing-to-individual-biology culture", which simply first emerged in the West. (This idea, or something like it, from his How The West Was Won.) So then if you just say how you're feeling, literally how you feel it, you're not keeping people's minds away from your appetites, which are presumably theirs as well. "I've got appetites" -- "those are my appetites too!" -- "Yes, appetites". Whereas a traditional culture can push against individual appetites, and through some form of censorship can make itself unique. I think in our American "Western" culture we still have lots of non-literalness and lots of censorship, but it comes from social pressure or maybe low-level authoritarianism, and not from a more monolithic presence, like an official religion or totalitarian government. ("Censorship" is a harsh word, like total bans, but there can be a softer version which is more like turning the volume up or down, maybe a lot, on some strain of culture.)

Maybe "hewing-to-invididual-biology" ends up being a kind of censorship of its own, causing us, when we look at our "desk" when we want to write songs, to mostly only see the things relating to courtship and mating, or overrepresent those, leaving out some others.

So maybe I was hoping that the censoring of reality (or the "artistic thematization", to pick a less loaded word than "censor") that was done in Indonesia was such to create a unique, love-song-downregulating cultural world. And maybe it is unique in some ways -- even still in "Cinta Melulu" I can hear some uniqueness -- but it is not nearly as unique as my idea of the possibility of cultural diversity seems to promise me.

It's true that in American popular music, we have a lot of love songs, but maybe a lot of non-love songs as well. I may be disinclined to be a fan of love songs, but I don't remember having a strong bias against them, and without trying, I ended up getting into the following bands between age 10 or so and age 30: Cocteau Twins, My Bloody Valentine, AIR, Stereolab, Klaus Schulze, and the instrumental music of J. S. Bach -- none of which are rich sources of heartfelt love songs; as well as They Might Be Giants, Simon and Garfunkel, and Elvis Costello, which do have some, but a fair amount, or a lot, of other songs. If you consider a non- or less-heartfelt love song to be a love song, I guess you could include MBV among the love song set, if you listen closely to the lyrics, but those seem like aestheticized dreams more than relations between two people, and I get the sense that MBV's lyrics are an afterthought to the music, which is the real point. Mostly when I listened to their album *Loveless*, I couldn't tell and didn't care what they were singing, and same with AIR, Stereolab, and Cocteau

Twins. I was listening more for music itself, perhaps the emotion of the singing, but not whatever story or point the words might have been trying to convey. And I would guess that there are a fair amount of Cocteau Twins, AIR, Stereolab, MBV, etc. listeners who approach that music like I did, and that the bands, more or less, expect that. In the "alternative music" tradition, there is a lot of music that doesn't end up connecting the listener to romantic love, sometimes by saying nothing about love in the lyrics, and sometimes by the mixing or how the words in the vocals are pronounced, so that the lyrics are de-emphasized for many listeners.

Maybe if you add up all the secular and Christian music in America (or in the Anglophone world, which is maybe more the cultural unit for popular music), everything on that culture's "desk" is being covered. The longing for what is not-here is where art comes from, perhaps. What do we not already have? Something in me wants there to be something other than Anglophone popular music, and maybe I get something of it in Southeast Asian music. But after I assimilate that, what then? I think that secular and Christian Anglophone popular music is still "appetite-following" music, is still part of our "appetite-following / Western" culture, and deliberately not following appetites, or not viewing life as being about things like hedonism or preference satisfaction, might open up new ways of listening to and making music. Maybe one could hope that, like adults, we can learn to not follow our appetites without an external force making us not follow them. Still, there would be the longing for what is not-here, or at least I would hope so, or else how could we be alive?

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What if the cultures of the whole world get the same contents on their "desks" and then talk about them literally? Perhaps they would see the objects on the "desks" in an uncensored way, or they would be "appetite-followers" and thus censor them the same way, having the same human appetites. Would that be harmony and truth? Or would it be endless stasis, or some other kind of death?

In San Diego, one 4th of July, I think I was a witness to the "Big Bay Boom Bust". I remember it, but somehow remember it happening late in the day instead of at night as it really did -- see video of it -- and I remember it being smaller. It was a fireworks show that had a glitch that made all the rockets go off in 30 seconds -- both more intense than a normal fireworks show, and disappointing. Everything went off and then it was all over. Also, I remember a story from the 2004 tsunami, where the huge tsunami wave drew up water from the shore, leaving parts of the ocean floor exposed, near the beach. Some people ran down to get the free fish just lying there where the water had been. I wonder if culturally we are part of a decades-long mixture, in some sense, of those two metaphors.

Holden Karnofsky has speculated that art is something that is mined. I

have thought similar things before I read him. Maybe things look really, really wonderful until we reach the end. One pessimistic version of this is to think that the "tsunami" is something like AGI killing us all so that it can do whatever it randomly thinks is important. But another, less pessimistic, take, is that we will survive the transition to AGI and continue a bonanza of cultural development, until we homogenize by enriching and making intercompatible all cultures into one -- maybe this isn't pessimistic at all, but I wonder, what might be lost if we get rid of cultural diversity, in the sense of, that there are different more or less distinct cultures, and also, what life would be like if we no longer could innovate artistically, because we had enthusiastically mined everything. If the outcome of that homogenization was sufficiently bad for us spiritually, that might be the real "tsunami", or part of it.

I read somewhere that Tyler Cowen was interested in culture, and so I thought I would get his book *Creative Destruction*, which is about how globalization is good for art. I guess I might want to plug that into the preceding two paragraphs by saying something like "globalization is the computer glitch in the Big Bay Boom Bust, or the powerful earthquake that draws the ocean off the beach in 2004" and the process of art excitingly intercombining and innovating like crazy is like the fireworks or the fish.

What I expect or somewhat hope to see in Cowen's book is things like arguments for why cultural homogenization is a good thing (perhaps because cultural differences aren't actually good, or because individual diversity outweighs the loss of them), why homogenization isn't going to go as far as anti-globalization people might fear, why artistic innovation will never end, why economic growth outweighs whatever cultural losses come from cultural homogenization. But randomly opening the book a few times and looking at a few sentences makes me think there may be other unexpected things that Cowen brings out, that I will find interesting.

It occurs to me to ask myself "why does the subject of cultural diversity matter?". Maybe "culture" is just a form of wealth, except insofar as it bears on a religion that can save. I think from an effective altruist standpoint, culture, some form of it, could bear on whatever is supposed to come out of the Long Reflection. For some reason, getting the Long Reflection right matters even to atheists, as though it's necessary in order for the future to really go well, that future being the repository of atheistic hopes and fears. From an MSLN perspective, I do think that culture in any of its forms has some bearing on whether people come to fully love God -- either it is a temptation, an anti-temptation, or prepares one to face temptation or anti-temptation better, if that doesn't just reduce to temptation or anti-temptation, or if neutral on the temptation/anti-temptation axis, is something that fills the mind, using time that could have been spent on spiritual maturing, perhaps offering rest, or distraction. So the question of culture matters, and of whether the right culture exists

and is accessible. This relates to cultural diversity and the phenomenon of cultural homogenization.

So is homogenization (the intermixing and equilibrating of all cultures into one culture) good or bad? Cowen, I think, will say that it's good. Some potential dangers that I see (off the top of my head) are: maybe having coherent (unmixed) traditions allows people to go deeper into them, maybe belonging to a family (thus an ethnic group) has some inherent value, maybe traditions that prevent us from being fulfilled in this life help us to learn to long for what is not-here, maybe when those longings connect to an until-now-unknown culture we experience a kind of blessing that will no longer be possible when we get too good at finding the things that satisfy our longings (perhaps because they are easily accessible for being part of our culture, like in the same language), maybe certain cultures are more compatible with being in tune with true value (holiness / the output of the Long Reflection). In principle, any of these could apply to the Long Reflection, and many could have some bearing on MSLN concerns.

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(Some more thoughts from my notepad:

> Cultural diversity: the desire for an unknown personality type, "Is this all there is?", Is "all there is" in the right proportions? Do we have "the answer"? Are we stuck on a fully-developed, nonetheless wrong, answer?)

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One thing I've assumed in this post so far is that human biology is relatively similar around the world, and that therefore culture can equilibrate to a common, homogenized state. However, in principle, human biology can be modified and unless transhumanism is checked in some way, I would assume that it will in the future. This means that humans can be engineered into new, divergent forms, or even new species, bringing about new cultures, and reintroducing cultural diversity.

Another less futuristic but still futuristic thought is that humans will no longer associate in tribes of ethnic descent (no more Germans, Indians, Arabs, etc.), but instead according to aesthetic tastes (goths, punks, metalheads, etc.). Or perhaps according to some other affinity. This is already happening, but it could happen to a much greater extent. The idea being that we can concentrate genes by re-sorting peoples (who genetically lean toward certain tastes) and then create cultures around those genetic affinities. This would be a more future-proof preservation of cultural diversity that might arise through civilizational drift.

This raises the question of connection to one's ancestors, which I take to be the foundation of nations and national culture. Connection to one's ancestors arises naturally out of being in a family and being connected to your parents (thus to their parents). This creates interest in the shared history of the people group which is one's parents, their parents and siblings, and so on back to some point in the past, some distant ancestor. A broad-brush characterization of modernity (and thus the hypermodernity of transhumanism) is that it is the destruction, erasing, denaturing, attenuating, setting-aside, etc. of family. And thus, of history, nations/tribes, and national/tribal culture.

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I might be able to write more here on this topic, but I think that's enough for now, and I will go see what *Creative Destruction* has to say.

Labels: #aesthetics, #altruism, #book review, #culture, #Efek Rumah Kaca, #family, #futurism, #Long Reflection, #music, #Nining Meida, #romance, #Tyler Cowen

Depravity

%depravity

Wednesday, June 22, 2022

I'm not sure whether I like how the word "depraved" is loaded, but I do think the question of "how naturally or fundamentally evil are people?" is an important one, and I guess "depravity" is how that's talked about in Christian theology.

How "depraved" are people?

I don't think reality makes a lot of sense if people have zero moral agency, no ability to make choices morally. (Moral free will is why there is unbearable suffering, as far as I can tell.) So I don't think people can be 100% predisposed to evil, otherwise *they* wouldn't be the evil ones, but rather that predisposition, or, originally, the being or beings that predisposed them so. I guess it's possible for it to be the case that suffering is permitted for the sake of other beings who have free will, other than humans. Then, perhaps, humans could be 100% predisposed toward evil -- but I think really humans just wouldn't exist as persons, and only as appendages of the body of the being that used them for evil.

On some level, I know myself, and can't be wrong about myself, having privileged access to myself, and *I* make decisions sometimes. They may be constrained by the options available, but I choose. I know that I affirm the good, and chafe at evil. Sometimes I fail to deeply oppose evil, or perhaps even like it, and that comes from the real me. Perhaps I am not in touch with decisions I have made (and likely will make) that go against my affirmation or chafing in the moment, and my whole person is not as affirming of the good, or inclined to chafe against evil, as I feel, but in the moment, with that little piece of me that is alive right then, I do affirm, or chafe, out of the I that is saying "I affirm good" or "I chafe at evil". My will is free, most of my waking life, though it may have limited options and efficacy.

In some moments I find myself doing things that I don't want to do, automatically, and being tempted by forces that I didn't choose to put into my thought-life, which put me in positions where my behavior is relatively far from what I would do if I were left in the most favorable situations. Part of my human nature is my body, the flesh of my brain, and it paints a picture of me to others and even myself which is not always accurate, through my behavior. It distorts the signal I'm really trying to send to others, and I can even take it to be who I am when it is a distortion, and not a trustworthy image of my real intentions.

Human behavior is somewhat naturally depraved, because our brains are programmed to sometimes be aggressive, hypersexual, manipulative, controlling, etc. But humans are not exactly the same as their behavior. Human behavior is often naturally whatever we would call the opposite of "depraved". And again, humans are not exactly the same as their behavior.

Where does this extra-human depravity come from? We don't choose it. Does God choose it? Why would God choose it? I don't think God could choose it. So who chose it? Presumably it came through the power of Satan. Satan wills that we have these aggressive, hypersexual, manipulative, controlling, etc. psychological natures. If Satan's will no longer prevails, then they go away. Psychopathy seemingly follows from genes. If these genes, and their phenotypes, are healed, then those who seem to be, from a behavioral point of view, moral monsters, may turn out to be merely humanly depraved. It's possible for someone to freely choose to be a psychopath, but perhaps in many or even most cases, people are psychopathic apart from any decision they made.

What do humanly depraved people look like? Someone like Tim Keller (whom I am using here as a name for a sincere, thoughtful, and kind Calvinist) would say "like me -- at my best". These are the horrific depths of human depravity, apart from the interference of Satan. It may sound like I'm making a joke at the expense of Calvinism, but I see an important truth in that view, which is that it's dangerous to assume you are no longer evil in any significant way, like your evil side could be rounded down to zero in your eyes, even if you are as mild-mannered as Tim Keller. We are tempted to view human nature through the lens of how bad Satan makes us, and how good God makes us, the behavior and outward appearance of us, and not our hearts which really choose.

I think that people are programmed or possessed both to be good and to be evil, and in their freedom, really are both good and evil, until they (we?) finish fully choosing the good. (Or choose to be evil sufficiently firmly to prevent them (us?) from fully choosing the good.)

Labels: #Calvinism, #evil, #mental security, #morality, #psychology, #Tim Keller, #what is a person?

News: 30 June 2022

%news-30-june-2022

Thursday, June 30, 2022

Sometimes bipolar depression acts like a reset button, so I stopped working on writing for a few days and have been slowly adding back work (maybe not coincidental with the situation in the next paragraph -- sometimes I "overclock" my brain or something like that). One thing I realized was that I should focus more on music. I have some songs that I want to record. Music is a lot harder for me than writing, in terms of what it takes to make a single unit of finished work.

One day, I released three posts in one day. The process of releasing a post is somewhat labor-intensive, because I have to edit them to a point where I feel okay releasing them, before I release them. So maybe I did too much in one day and messed one of them up somewhat. That's why I added a note about that in that post.

Labels: #news and meta

Reason and Budi

%reason-and-budi

Monday, July 4, 2022

Epistemic status: quick thoughts, haven't tried to think through all the implications in depth.

I can't remember if I've written any of this in this blog before, but I have an idea of what reason is: the interrelationship of all truths, and/or of all evidence -- and, "evidence" being anything which people perceive, whether with senses, noetically, or in any other form that may exist. Reason is the process for coming to the whole truth.

Today I read an article about Indonesian philosophy, which discussed *budi*. It says at one point

> The *Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language* defines budi as an 'inner faculty which integrates reasoning and feeling to distinguish between good and evil.'

The article also mentions that Indonesian philosophy is integrative, mentioning how its Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are seen as one thing, in a sense, which perhaps has some parallel to my definition of "reason".

How can *budi* and my "reason" interrelate? Perhaps *budi* is being present to the moment or situation which connects to one's reasonings and feelings? This presence enables you to see how they all add up to form some kind of moral judgment. You actually see them for what they are. Or maybe it's like if the world is full of 2's, and 4's, but without *budi*, you can't see when two 2s makes a 4, as though *budi* supplies the +'s and =s needed to say "2 + 2 = 4"? So then *budi* is an embodied faculty which allows a person to form a more integrated truth, and thus is necessary to connect to or seek the whole truth, the ultimate goal of reason.

The whole truth is made up of sub-whole-truths, which contain the whole truth within some limited area. Each sub-whole-truth requires that the person looking at them have *budi* or something like it, in order to understand that reality, if that reality contains any kind of intuitive content. Perhaps merely to integrate reasoning with reasoning requires something akin to *budi*, although this is getting further from the definition given. Also, perhaps *budi* only applies to cases where good and evil or right and wrong are being distinguished. But good/right and evil/wrong (or "value and disvalue", perhaps) are woven into maybe literally everything, and thus (almost?) always are needed to know the truth of

anything.

It's possible to limit yourself to only the sensory world (the sub-whole-truth of the sensed world), and thus avoid the intuitive and perhaps thus *budi*, but maybe you can't know good and evil that way, and for practical purposes, we need to know some kind of axiological charge of what we perceive so that we know what behaviors will be purposeful, will have a point, with respect to what we perceive. *We* relate to reality, and this is part of knowing the truth. We, as persons, who have to live. Thus we need to know good and evil -- maybe we have a kind of mutilated *budi* still in operation in the "fact / value split" West. This *budi* enables us to see that there is a point in doing things, and what that point is, despite the way our culture suppresses our conscious affirmation of moral realism, the idea that there is a fact as to what values there are. Any sub-whole-truth that connects to practical action requires *budi* or something like it.

Labels: #Indonesia, #intuition, #philosophy, #rationality, #truth

The Story of Life Not Over

%the-story-of-life-not-over

Tuesday, July 5, 2022

Perhaps one of the reasons why people do not contemplate looking for the truth on a deep level, or going to look how to do the really right thing that they can do, is because they feel, for some reason, that their lives are over. Not so much that they expect to die in a few months -- if they actually believe that, and it's true, then maybe there isn't much more left to do in their lives. But rather, "life being over" in the sense that the moment has passed, like a band that has its big moment in the sun, leaves a mark on the record of music, and then recedes to a long twilight in which they record, tour, or fade out. Some people say that once you get married, your life is over, as though the succession of dates before marriage shape you, and when you settle into your final self, "life is over". (It had better be your final self, since you've chosen your final mate.)

Is life really over? If you think it is, it is. The truth is something outside of you and your life. If it is still true that there are people who suffer, and who are at risk of the second death, then you have an ethical reason to call into question your interpretation of your life being over.

Labels: #altruism, #life choices, #maturity, #note, #truth

Indexing Things to Other Things

%indexing-things-to-other-things

Tuesday, July 5, 2022

I use sentences like "People are indexed to their culture and not to God", but I realized that this isn't a completely common term, and lightweight search engine use may not give a clear answer as to what I mean by "indexed to".

Unfortunately, I don't remember exactly where I got that term from or the (I think) illuminating specificity of how it was used in that original context or in the definition given there. But I can say how I understand it, and that might help readers of this blog.

Indexing has to do with reference points. One meaning that I may use is "linking yourself to another reality, on a literal one-to-one correspondence, or a correspondence which resembles a literal one-to-one correspondence". On some level you automatically follow the reality of the other thing, perhaps because you choose to be linked that way, or you chose it and it has become a habit, or without realizing it you developed or inherited the habit. Sometimes though the intention to be true to it is a habit, to actually be true to it requires conscious thought and volition, to successfully execute the intention.

You tend to have to update yourself to new knowledge about the reference reality. You aren't necessarily in one-to-one correspondence with the thing as it is, but you are with the thing as it has revealed itself, and your intention, or habit, is to correspond with the thing as it is.

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A meaning similar to this (probably the source of me knowing about it) is found in math and related fields (economics/finance). If I recall correctly, Kurt Gödel used indexing in developing his Incompleteness Theorem.

Labels: #definition, #holiness, #math, #truth

Seductively Mild Depression / Disengagement

%seductively-mild-depression

Tuesday, July 5, 2022

Sometimes I experience a kind of mental disengagement. This correlates with my bipolar depression. My depression takes different forms, sometimes a proneness to irritability, sometimes a slowed-down mind, sometimes an increased openness to despair or giving up, sometimes fatigue.

All of these either now or in the past have taken on blatant, extreme forms. For instance, in an extreme mental disengagement spell, I can't focus the best, can't work on things. My eyes might go somewhat blank, and I might find it difficult to pursue lines of thought or to recall words.

If my disengaging depression is mild enough, I don't sense it as being something that should not be. A strong depression is obviously a problem, something to fight and not something to trust or build your life around. Instead, you want to separate yourself from it and what it tells you, and get back to normal. Fortunately, having bipolar disorder means my depression spells go away more or less on their own. I think it would be harder for someone with clinical depression that had no mood cycling. But for me, I can write off strong depression as "not me" and then wait it out so I can be in the mood that reflects my real values, something euthymic, or less depressed, or whatever.

But a mild depression can trick me sometimes, and make me feel like I'm experiencing normal -- a new normal. As I grow, I experience different flavors of depression, some of them for the first time. I am uncorking the mellow wines of older age, perhaps? Maybe I like these mild depressions? There's something seductive about a sufficiently mild depression.

(In a disengaged depression, I may feel like nothing matters, because I can't engage with reality. But it isn't really true that nothing matters, it's just my mood. Or I may feel like I'm not interested in working to engage with reality. I can choose whether to identify with the disengagement or lack of desire to work, or to reject them. But in the moment, it's telling me that I'm a certain way, and external reality is a certain way, and what it tells me covers my mind.)

Feeling bad doesn't bother me -- at least, it doesn't seem like a real threat to my ability to do what matters. But being slowed-down -- mellowed out

-- with a relatively positive hedonic "flavor" is pretty dangerous, exactly because it doesn't feel dangerous. The danger is that I get caught in a habit of being disengaged. My mind can't do heavy lifting, or see things sharply and clearly in these mild depressions. So, I am less able to do what I need to do or even to witness the truth. I can go with the flow of my culture, but I have lost my purpose. I am indexed to the flow around me, and I no longer am indexed to God. I am no longer myself, I cease to exist on some level, and that's actually not a good thing.

My different moods are like being plunged underwater (or hypomania is like some kind of opposite equivalent, like being stuck in the sea of air, flying 10,000 feet above the ground). So I don't expect to be able to do too much to control them, since they are what they are and have their power. But I still fight them, and maybe if I didn't, I would stay in them longer. And maybe milder moods are more within my power to fight effectively. At the very least, even if moods like this are persistent until they "decide" to leave, I can learn to identify when I am drifting, when I am disengaged or unable to engage, and see this psychological state as being other than me, instead of attaching to it, as I sometimes automatically do. Hopefully then I can get out of that state as soon as possible.

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How does rest play into this? Disengagement and rest may necessarily correlate.

Most people go on vacation without worrying about whether they will choose to go back to work at the end of it. But imagine if when you went on vacation (maybe to a beach resort in another country), you were concerned that you might not be able to tear yourself away from it to get on the plane to go home. If you stayed there, you would lose your job. Maybe in that case, vacation would sound like a bad idea.

Maybe with my life, some rest is relatively safe, and some of it is dangerous. If rest is something that will reliably lead back to work, then that's relatively safe. But rest that takes on a life of its own, and cuts me off from doing what I need to do, is dangerous.

Labels: #mental health, #mental strength, #perception, #psychology, #rest, #status quo, #who am I?, #work

Book Review Preview: The Meaning of Marriage by Timothy Keller (with Kathy Keller)

%book-review-preview-meaning-of-marriage

Thursday, July 7, 2022

See also the review of this book.

I have had a copy of *The Meaning of Marriage* (by Tim Keller and his wife Kathy Keller) for a while, and I even got a good way through it a few years ago, but I don't remember too much of what it says now, as far as I can recall. Since it's related to families, and that is a theme of this blog recently, it seems like now is a good time to read the book and review it.

For some reason, I feel like not setting strong expectations, or trying to set out to get anything out of this reading.

I will point out that there are some parallels between marriage and international relations. Each spouse is a foreign nation to the other, with their own native culture and customs, based in their own history. Interspousal relations can involve diplomacy, game theory, assessments of one's own vulnerabilities, putting up walls and enforcing boundaries, the fear of exploitation, hopes for mutual benefit, and so on, just like in international relations. One theory of reality is that wholes emerge from their parts, and so then a nation's pattern of trusting and of going about relating to "the other" would emerge from millions of marriages. Millions of Russian marriages have something to do with Putin, millions of American marriages have something to do with Trump and Biden. Perhaps even the marriages (and past marriages and quasi-marriages) of Trump, Biden, and Putin have, or have had, a further effect on their own on American and Russian foreign policy, through those heads of government. Anything one could point out about national issues might be applicable to individual spouses and marriages, so for instance, the idea of "having nothing left to lose and speaking the truth" or of "remembering yourself from a position someone who can no longer win" (as discussed in my review of *Holy Resilience*, in the context of Jewish cultural memory) could be applied to individuals in a marriage, or at least it might be worth seeing how applicable it could be.

But as interesting and potentially valuable as those topics are, I feel like I should not invest too heavily in them in this reading.

I am interested in applying the ideas of the New Wine System and ethical theism to this reading, in other words, to see what dangers there are that come from marriage and what Keller says about marriage, from those perspectives.

Otherwise, I plan to simply react to the book as it comes to me.

Labels: #book review, #family, #politics, #relationships, #romance, #Tim Keller, #trust

Learning Indonesian, Part 2

%learning-indonesian-part-2

Monday, July 18, 2022

Update on learning Indonesian.

I realized after a while that looking at random Indonesian Wikipedia pages wasn't rewarding. Mainly because, while it was true that I was learning some words as I tried reading them, I needed a more efficient way to build my vocabulary.

(My theory is that young children mostly build up a grab bag of vocabulary words and then later on figure out how to use them, and use them correctly within their culture. So I will try a similar method.)

A method that I am trying is to make lists of 25 words each (derived from Indonesian Wikipedia pages), and then run through them with a quiz program (**quiz** from bsd-games). Sometimes I type the English words in response to the Indonesian, and sometimes the opposite. Some words have multiple meanings. Sometimes one meaning will sort of cover all of them. But otherwise I just learn one of the meanings, figuring that I will have to figure out the nuances later. For now, I want to keep my momentum going and learn lots of words, even if imperfectly. My goal is to get to the point where I can mostly read random Indonesian Wikipedia articles, maybe have to learn a few words as I go, or maybe even figure out words I don't know from context.

If I had to give advice to my younger self, or generic younger selves (high school or college students studying Spanish), I would say to learn vocabulary on the side, like I'm doing now with Indonesian. School teaches you how to learn, and theory / grammar, and helps you avoid pitfalls, but to actually master subject material, you need to study on your own. A language that you are half-fluent in is less than 50% as useful as one you are fully fluent in, and school language classes (at least, from my experience with seven years of Spanish) will not make you fluent. But it is relatively painless, and maybe even enjoyable, to acquire lots of vocab words.

I remember some philosophy grad students I knew, who looked at their fellow students, and noticed which ones studied philosophy on their own time, and which only studied the philosophy that they had to for school. A sign that you are really into philosophy is that you study it on your own, in addition to what you have to for school.

Labels: #education, #Indonesia, #motivation, #seriousness

MSLN and Mormonism?

%msln-and-mormonism

Monday, July 18, 2022

A commenter on this blog pointed out similarities between the New Wine System and Mormonism. Looking at Wikipedia didn't disconfirm what they said.

I think I will regret saying too much before I do my own studying. But a few questions seem okay to ask now.

Does this mean that there is an existing religion (Mormonism) that has something like the MSLN motivational structure? It might be hard to isolate one idea's effect on a culture's motivation, since there might be a lot of other factors. But I would guess that it could give an idea what one New Wine religion looks like, if you could "control for confounders".

Mormonism may have a New Wine structure "on the books" (present in its teachings somewhere) but not emphasize it socially (not really preach it). Is Mormonism "evangelical" (about keeping people out of hell) or is it "civilizational" (about making a functioning society in this life), "people-pleasing" (about reassuring, strengthening, catering to its people and their felt needs), or something else other than "evangelical"? I would guess that it's a mix of all three, and the mix is regulated with preaching rather than teaching. At least that's how things seem (to me) to work in mainstream Christianity. If Mormonism downplays the risk of being lost, or fails to mention it, it would be different than MSLN, although it might still be a basically New Wine-reflecting thing.

Usually I have thought that the Bible gains credence from its compatibility with the New Wine System (and/or legitimism). If God is the God of MSLN, then if he produced a revelation, it would most likely be a New Wine- and legitimism-compatible teaching. Maybe this means that if we found such a teaching, we should try to do what it says, assuming that it certainly could be from God -- we being "searchers" for opportunities to please God, we would reach out toward possible ways to align ourselves with him. Plausibly, LDS scripture as a whole (Bible + books specific to LDS canon) is New Wine, and is compatible with legitimism. Does this mean that MSLN gives credence to the LDS canon? What would be the implications of that? (How does this "giving credence" thing work?)

Well, now I someday intend to read the LDS canon and some secondary materials. I can add that to my list of things to do.

Labels: #Mormonism, #motivation, #note, #religion, #scripture

Can Good Beings be Consequentialists?

%can-good-beings-be-consequentialists

Tuesday, July 19, 2022

Is God a consequentialist? In some ways, I find it easy to say "yes". I can see God wanting to maximize some variable (whatever that variable may be -- maybe a measure of some complex good). But, part of being a consequentialist can easily be to do something or allow something bad so that greater good can result.

Can a perfectly holy being do something bad, even if greater good would result? Maybe, maybe not. I would initially lean toward "no". But obviously God does a lot in the world. There are times when it clearly looks like he orchestrated some event which does a greater good thing through some form of evil. So are God's hands tied by his own purity? Or is there a way for him to accomplish his will without sinning?

Generally I think of the purpose of Satan as being that of doing what God can't do. So if people need to be tempted, through Satan, it is done. Satan wills evil, which God can't do. God can execute the will of Satan, but he can't initiate harm. In that sense, it is not God who does bad things so that greater things result, but Satan. Satan is a self-defeating person (or collective), when greater good results from his (their) evil, but I suppose hopes that greater good doesn't result, which is the case sometimes.

So the kind of consequentialism which is evil leading to greater good requires both the participation of God and Satan. Or, perhaps, humans can perform the Satanic role -- and may even have in mind God's results. The humans are capable of doing so because they are at least somewhat morally insensitive (Satan's doing) and yet may still have some real desire to do God's work. To be such a consequentialist is a risky thing, because you are bringing Satan's will into the world, and it can affect who you are. It may be more effective in the short term or medium term to be this kind of consequentialist, but it is morally caustic and thus risky.

Labels: #altruism, #God, #morality, #spiritual warfare

A Sketch of MSLN Education

%a-sketch-of-msln-education

Monday, July 25, 2022

I think one of the most important things that a religion can try to figure out is how to educate its young (and old). Arguably, personal transformation (becoming more holy, for instance) is a special case of education.

How would MSLN best be taught? I don't really know at this point, or feel like making even a simplified overview that might include the whole subject. But, I can write a quick sketch, and hope that in the future it can be filled out.

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In a way, this blog is an education in MSLN. If you can read English with enough proficiency, you can get a lot of ideas from it. But, I think ideas are the tip of the iceberg, and most of what matters is, do you apply the ideas?, do you intuitively understand the ideas?, do you accept the ideas?, and perhaps other things.

So, though I have worked as much as I have to explain things explicitly and conceptually, there are things which people need to understand, in order for them to even be able to accept, intuitively understand, and apply MSLN. Perhaps some people can read this blog "cold" and accept and intuitively understand, to some extent. But to deeply accept and intuitively understand requires deeper preparation or practice.

Certain traits favor success in being shaped by MSLN. This is not intended to be a complete list, but a few are: endurance, valuing truth (especially moral truth), and desire for reality. Each of these are things which are both valued and practiced to get the full benefit.

These do not have to be taught by believers in MSLN. They can be taught to anyone, including in secular contexts.

Working in the "upstream" values and practices that lead to MSLN is a wide field. These same values and practices should be "downstream" of MSLN. Perhaps there could be a loop where the downstream of MSLN feeds the upstream of it.

(So now it is important to try to figure out all of the upstream/downstream values and practices of MSLN.)

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How should adults relate to children? To some extent, children are different from adults and should be treated as different. But in other ways, they are the same as adults and should be treated the same.

Children should be respected. In the past, I've written about respect for young people in Rootedness and Respect, and without going back to read it, I think it at least gives an idea of how to treat children, although at the time I wrote it I had young adults more in mind.

The maturing, current maturity, and eventual mature state of children should be valued. These are upstream of valuing growing in holiness, being holy now, and eventually being completely holy (which, perhaps, could be the same as being completely spiritually mature). (In that, if children and their teachers value maturity broadly enough, that includes holiness, or if "maturity" is construed narrowly to be "maturity as recognized by secular people", at least that is a case of the broader maturity, where a person changes their values in order to better relate to reality.) Growing up should be seen as a good thing, in order to help instill a "that-which-brings-to-completion" toward what is perhaps in the end identical with being 100% in tune with God.

(Those are a few ideas of how adults should treat children from an MSLN perspective. That would be what MSLN might add to whatever standard people already hold themselves to when dealing with children.)

Labels: #childhood, #education, #holiness, #maturity, #spiritual growth

Book Review Preview: Along the Way, ed. Ron Bruner and Dana Kennamer Pemberton

%book-review-preview-along-way-ed-ron

Tuesday, July 26, 2022

See also the review.

I had been meaning to read *Along the Way: Conversations About Children and Faith* (a book of essays edited by Ron Bruner and Dana Kennamer Pemberton) for a while, and this seemed like a good time to look into it. It's a book about children and Christianity. It looks like it's from a "Stone-Campbell" perspective (the broader movement that includes the Churches of Christ, the tradition I grew up in).

I guess this book will ask questions in different categories which I can try to answer from a MSLN perspective. (How to relate Stone-Campbell faith to children might provide a template for which questions to answer from an MSLN perspective.) I guess that's mainly what I'm looking to it to provide. But maybe there will be other things that I find interesting in it.

Labels: #childhood, #Christianity, #church, #education, #religion

Diversity, Inequality, and Family

%diversity-inequality-and-family

Tuesday, July 26, 2022

If you were trying to minimize inequality, and were being rigorous about it, each person would have to be identical to all others. Because, if they were different, it would be highly likely that in some way or other, if you added up all their natural traits, they would add up to some people being better off, inheriting more privilege, than others.

Their environments and sets of experiences would also have to be identical, so that their present selves would not have any more privilege (or disadvantage) than each other, this ensured by them not having different past selves.

So, in order to have diversity, we have to allow (and implicitly or explicitly excuse) a certain amount of inequality.

Controlling human lives so that they are identical and perfect inhibits the expression of free will, and may inhibit intentions of free will as well, because perhaps to not express your free will weakens your capacity to naturally will what you will. (I think of the analogy of keeping a dream journal, which encourages your "subconscious self" to remember dreams. So, acting on your free will may encourage your will to be alive, as it is a voice that may close up if it is not called on to speak.) To act on your will lets you see what it looks like in the world, helping you to grow. So, from an MSL standpoint, enforcing rigorous equality may be a mistake, because it could make life less useful in bringing about spiritual growth.

Enforcing relative equality may have benefits, but at some point we have to let go of equality, before it becomes an absolute, and choose something else to be our absolute.

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An argument against inequality might (possibly) solely consist of lists of the harms that inequality causes. In that case, maybe what really matters are those harms, and not the inequality itself. If there is some way to have inequality (and thus diversity) without harm, then that might be the way to go.

When families are working right, they are groups of people that possess radical inequality which doesn't cause harm. Parents, for instance, are

hugely different than their children, and have powers far beyond what their children possess. Yet, when a family is working right, that does not pose a threat to either parents or children.

It does make sense to me that on some level, we ought to look at each other as equals. Maybe, despite their differences in age and wisdom, ideal parents look on even their under-5 aged children as equals -- on some level -- and treat them in some sense as equals. But that doesn't mean that on other levels, we may not be different, and therefore (very likely) unequal.

Labels: #childhood, #economics, #education, #family, #politics

The Lack of Awareness of Abusers and Abused

%the-lack-of-awareness-of-abusers-and

Wednesday, July 27, 2022

Outside where I live, just now [as of drafting this initially], there has been an incident with a young man and young woman. He was mad because "she disrespected him". She argued back. He had been driving (I think), and she was his passenger. He stopped on the side of the street, and they yelled at each other. He grabbed her smartphone and left, effectively stranding her there. Someone (not me) lent the woman a phone, and the woman got an Uber.

--

Is this somewhere on the scale of "abusive relationship"? Could there be justice in what he did? He may have demanded ego-respect, or she may have threatened some kind of survival-respect. He took her phone, stranding her there. Whether justified or not, the story running through his head was "I was disrespected". Could he see her, or was there a lack of awareness?

If she is in an abusive relationship, why hasn't she left? I will add to my account above that, from things that she said to him and to others, she did not seem absolutely afraid of him. She could argue back to him, and said to the person who lent her a phone that she wasn't in danger from him. Yet nothing I saw ruled out the possibility of the relationship being abusive and her not having left it. If that was the case, maybe she also had a lack of awareness, something that she somehow could not see.

Labels: #psychology, #relationships, #respect, #romance, #spiritual bondage, #spiritual warfare

Salvation, Death, and Trust

%salvation-death-and-trust

Wednesday, July 27, 2022

Some notes about salvation, death, and trust, which maybe help to clarify past writing.

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A definition of death is "that which you can't allow to happen to you", at least, that is what is death *to you*.

The second death is something which perhaps "you can't allow to happen to you".

Until you are actually in heaven, there is always some kind of risk of turning against God in the end, as far as any of us knows.

It is valuable to trust God. In fact, it is necessary, in the end. How can you trust God if you are concerned that you will die the second death? To trust God fully requires that you come into tune with him. Concern that is instrumental in causing you to come into tune with him enables you to really trust him. Better to not trust in the sense of having concern, now, so that you trust more in the sense of obedience and arrive at full trust in God, in the end.

To journey to God involves going through dangers. You need a certain amount of confidence to keep going, but you also need to be watchful of danger, and perhaps even be concerned about it. It's like crossing a rope bridge with wooden planks that you walk on, that has some planks missing.

If you place God first, then you are willing to die for him -- even to be annihilated eternally for him. You still avoid the second death, but it is no longer "that which you can't allow to happen to you". God doesn't want you to die the second death, and that is a good reason for you to avoid it.

Labels: #death, #God, #psychology, #trust

Mature Capitalism

%mature-capitalism

Wednesday, July 27, 2022

Capitalism is geared toward giving people what they want. It can also reshape people so that they want what capitalism has to give.

There's a tension between giving kids what they want and disciplining them so that they grow up. American capitalism is sort of a bizarre elaboration of the principle of "giving kids what they want", and something like Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia is a very negative (and more bizarre) example of an elaboration of the principle of "disciplining kids" / "giving kids what they don't want because it's better for them". They were taskmasters who worked people to death in pursuit of a more moral society.

Communists and capitalists might both justify themselves by fear of each other. Illiberal (Communist, traditional Muslim, traditional Orthodox civilization, perhaps other) governments and societies might fear consumerism's spiritual and cultural acid, while liberal (capitalist, democratic, Western) might fear illiberalism's literal or figurative abuse of children, the way they make "children" (or children) unhappy, or unhappy in the extreme. If I wanted to side with the illiberals, I would most easily find common cause with their fear of the worst of liberalism, including capitalist consumerism as it keeps people from maturity. Stifling or underfeeding maturity is dangerous, as much as abuse is.

What if children grow up to become adults in capitalist societies, and with their consumer freedom, make choices based in maturity, which capitalism then eagerly instantiates? Maybe this is the way to avoid the two extremes -- freedom (consumerism), which is being used with maturity (discipline).

How is capitalism bending us? Is it bending us toward maturity, or away from it? What kind of producer would make a product, or what kind of service industry would make a service, that would be best consumed by a mature person and less so by an immature person? That producer or service industry would have a motive to bend and organize consumer psychology in the direction of maturity.

(But it's better not to bend people toward maturity. But what about encouraging maturity, or making space for it?)

If such products or services can't be conceived of, is it possible for mature consumers to push back against capitalism? Is there a way for mature consumers to organize? Companies have their "bottom line" at stake

(which is their ability to avoid starvation, or something like that), so they are very motivated to do what they do. Can consumers be as serious as them, even though their consumption patterns aren't life and death to them (aren't as obviously life and death)?

I'm not really sure what spiritually mature consumption looks like, other than maybe giving to charities, or better, to more- or most-effective charities (it's mature to want your money to actually do good). So maybe the industry or group that is pioneering mature (rather than merely "late") capitalism is effective altruism. But perhaps there are other ways to promote spiritually mature consumption that I can't think of right now.

Labels: #capitalism, #economics, #holiness, #maturity

Prepared, Unprepared

%prepared-unprepared

Thursday, July 28, 2022

"Effective altruism" can be broken down into two words, "effective", and "altruism". Similar words are "effectiveness, effectively" and "altruist, altruistically".

Effectiveness is better served by preparation. Perhaps to maximize effectiveness, it seems like we should be maximally prepared.

What about altruism? Desiring to be effective makes sense if you are an altruist. So it makes sense to be prepared. But how do you know, for sure, that you're prepared? Can you always be prepared, or are there situations where you may be unprepared, or know that you are unprepared? So part of altruism is to risk lack of preparation and endure the consequences.

Lack of preparation tests and confirms your altruism, your alignment with doing good for others. If you pass the test and are confirmed, your altruism may be strengthened.

Repentance is something we are always capable of doing, and which we are always unprepared to do. (That is a nice sentence to present without context, but I will explain:) Whatever component of what you're doing that is you sinning, is something you're 100% capable of not doing. And you get no help from anyone or anything in ceasing to do it, or else it would not be you who was ceasing to do it. The way we contribute to other people's salvation (or the opposite) is by presenting temptations, or anti-temptations, choices which they face entirely on their own resources.

Labels: #altruism, #faith, #holiness, #trust, #work

Good Fakeness

%good-fakeness

Tuesday, August 2, 2022

Normally I am against fakeness (at least, I aspire to be). But I think a certain kind of fakeness is instrumental in becoming real. Better to increase your fakeness temporarily if it leads to you becoming more real in the long run.

Children (or other young people), sometimes begin to be a real ... something ... or to embody a real value, by being seemingly or really insincere in valuing it, by acting as though they are something they seemingly or really are not.

When we sleep, we pretend to be asleep, as though inviting the spirit of unconsciousness into ourselves by acting like it, maybe to show we are kin to it. Some spirits need to trust us to make their homes in us.

It's true that people who exhibit an immature or fake form of a role or value may not be reliable at that point, if you want someone to do a job or validate a value. But their fakeness may be headed toward greater realness.

Note that if you aspire to pursue "good fakeness", you have to go to realness at some point or else it ends up being just fakeness.

Labels: #childhood, #maturity, #note, #spiritual growth

Obligation vs. Desert Love

%obligation-vs-desert-love

Tuesday, August 2, 2022

Love often requires going through the desert, in which you do not feel like loving. Obligation also makes you do what you do not feel like doing. Love is good and obligation is bad (those words used in this paragraph). When we love in the desert, we still love, with who we are, although with what we are, we do not want to love. But when we do things out of obligation, we feel like not doing what we do out of who we are. Why do we act out of obligation? Perhaps out of fear for ourselves or out of our own hungers, or maybe other reasons. A test for whether you are doing good out of desert love, or out of obligation: do you resent what you do? Generally, love does not resent the difficulties and sacrifices that go with it.

It is better to choose desert love over obligation, and, I guess, counterintuitive though that sounds, it is entirely up to our free choice as to which we choose. "Who we are" is somehow entirely within our power to shape, although it doesn't feel like it. Perhaps there is a certain level of service that "what we are" can sustain, and given that, it is entirely up to us whether we pursue it out of love (including desert love), or out or obligation.

(When you love someone or something for long enough, you will enter periods of the desert, where it doesn't feel good or you don't feel like remaining committed. If it is only "what you are" that doesn't feel like it, then that's fine (although subjectively it's hard and can be hard practically as well). But if "who you are" doesn't feel like doing good, that is not such a good thing. Perhaps if you intend to love someone or something, you may at first obligate yourself fakely. But that is not so bad, since really you ("who you are") want to love.)

Labels: #love, #morality, #note, #psychology, #social pressure, #what is a person?

Libertarian Holiness

%libertarian-holiness

Tuesday, August 2, 2022

If you want to promote holiness, you will tend to promote self-control. Perhaps for those undergoing some kind of transition time, while they come to naturally see things through God's eyes. Certainly receiving the Spirit from God can help you be holy, but maybe that Spirit sometimes is a voice that tells you to do something that is unnatural to you at first.

It is best for your nature to be calmed by God so that you lack the desires to sin. But much of life is lived in a state of being possessed by those desires. We don't want the desires to give birth in the world, because we love the world, something God loves. By loving the world, we shape ourselves more into being like God. So we practice self-control, because it's the best thing that we can do sometimes.

A message that exerts energy toward you controlling yourself can be socialized into a social group exerting energy toward you controlling yourself, and that isn't far from a social group controlling you.

So, (a theory:) the stronger the social group, the more it has to downplay holiness (especially in the form of good behavior) or else it risks becoming controlling of its members. Being called to moral excellence, a life well-lived, as soon as possible, puts pressure on a group to control its members so that it can look like there is moral excellence, and the group has to feel like it's pursuing moral excellence, because that's the best thing it can pursue. So, terrified of that controllingness, we downplay moral excellence, to protect ourselves from control.

If this threat is real, what can we do? Maybe the thing to do if you want to develop a movement that is not controlling of its members, but does emphasize holiness or any other high commitment to God, involving the will, is to be as libertarian as possible, where it counts.

Interpersonal libertarianism is the freedom that people have from each other in direct personal relationships. ("Social libertarianism" is the term I would prefer, but I think that already has a meaning of "political libertarianism on so-called 'social' issues".) That's the most important dimension. Then, freedom in the structures that are closest to the interpersonal (church, family, friend group) are a close second in importance. Then, freedom in the other social structures, as they bear on the question of how other people might try to manufacture or engineer who a person is.

This isn't necessarily freedom from the need to help other people, but rather, freedom from them trying to control you in the name of making you a better person. Ideally, you help other people not because you are obligated to, but because you love them and love helping them. But the sheer quantity of service that may be required in the world may exceed the amount that can be provided by those who love without obligation or something like it. The responsibility to help flows from the person or situation that needs help and still calls to us, even if we are free from interpersonal control. The responsibility is a fact, and we can proclaim the truth of that fact, but some are tempted to try to control people to make them act in accordance with the fact.

I think there is a difference between telling people the moral truth and saying things that you hope will change people's minds and get them to do the right thing. I don't see a problem with speaking the moral truth, no matter how strict. But trying to change the world (i.e. other people) with words, I'm not as sure of. I know I have done things that could have the effect of the latter myself, although generally I do not desire to change other people, at least not instinctually. But I think I trust the former more now. So I want to speak the moral truth and design ways for people to act on the moral truth, rather than exerting my will to change other people to do what's right.

People like thickness in their relationships. With interpersonal libertarianism, human relationships may thin out to enable freedom, but your relationship with God should become thicker. You can't control God.

("Connectional" -- "grabby", involved, well-being mixed up with others', attached, emotionally close.)

Jesus was (I think) more interpersonally libertarian than interpersonally authoritarian or "connectional". He was holy, and grew in wisdom when he was young. He was oriented first toward the Father, and secondarily toward people.

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Is it possible to love God if someone forces you to? God doesn't seem to think so, or else he would force us to love him. So this is a reason to practice a libertarian form of holiness culture.

So no matter how urgent it is to bring people to a state of holiness -- you can't really "bring them" to it, they have to come themselves. And yet it is important for you to do your job of anti-temptation in keeping with the urgency of reality.

Could there be a forceful anti-temptation? Could you force moral values on people such that they will come to love them for themselves? We do this with children. I suspect that often this tactic only teaches people to love

the good as children, and prevents them from developing a mature love of the good. There may be a tradeoff, where you can get people to buy into a religion as children, seemingly successfully, through applying that force, but inhibit them from really becoming mature, thus, really fully loving God with all of their beings. (Maybe we hope that children grow up later on in their adult years, once given their liberty?) But on the other hand, the libertarian way can seem to not get enough people to buy into religion at all, though the ones who do, really do so.

I hope that some of the failure of libertarian religion comes from it not being practiced energetically, and that it's possible for those pursuing libertarian holiness to have something like the force and urgency of authoritarians (the energy and sense of necessity of their force and urgency, for example, or an endemically libertarian urgency), without being authoritarian. People could practice libertarian religion with libertarian actions and attitudes toward people, with the spirit of those who believe that inner character (their own and other people's) is of life and death importance.

Labels: #God, #holiness, #Jesus, #morality, #social connection, #social pressure, #spiritual bondage, #spiritual growth, #truth, #what is a person?

Urgent vs. Relaxed

%urgent-vs-relaxed

Wednesday, August 3, 2022

In contrast to "patient vs. impatient", which are loaded such that patience is good and impatience is bad, or "complacent vs. engaged", where complacency is bad and engagedness is good, I could say "relaxed vs. urgent", hoping that that is not loaded.

A good time for urgency is to prevent a child from walking into oncoming traffic. A good time for relaxedness is at the end of the day so you can fall asleep. Relaxedness (to the point of a lack of urgency) is bad in the former case, and urgency is bad in the latter. So there is a place for both.

I listened to talk radio a bit and wrote my impressions:

> Listening to NPR is like sitting in a cafe on an overcast day. Low key jazz is playing in the cafe. The information you get from NPR is your tea that you sip. Sometimes it makes you feel sad. Sometimes it makes you feel calm, or contemplative. You can spend hours in the cafe, more or less relaxed.
>
> Listening to conservative talk radio is like driving around on a hot day, trying to get things done. Somebody cuts you off in traffic. You have to do business with a supplier and you think he might be screwing you over. You think back to the fight you had with your wife last night and feel angry about it.

NPR is part of relaxed culture, and conservative talk radio is part of urgent culture. I don't know that either are very good for motivating sustained productive work. At least, I don't feel like it after listening to either. I feel passiveness or even despair after listening to them, though they each have their own flavor. But if there was a talk radio that resembled the works of J. S. Bach, that would image a kind of relaxed engagedness. (As well as some other traits from my notes:)

> Listening to both liberal and conservative talk radio makes me think of a third kind of talk radio. It's something I can't really do myself, but here is the show I would make:
>
> It airs during the afternoon rush hour. It is called "Bach Talk Radio" (or a better name than that). It promotes the vibes of J. S. Bach, specifically "delayed gratification", "prolificness /

productivity / diligence", "solidity / stability", "patience", "complexity".

We face a world full of things that need doing. Maintaining a kind of urgency is good, but during your afternoon rush hour, maybe you need to be calmed down. But you can remain engaged, without being dragged down into the despair of NPR or conservative talk radio. That's what "Bach Talk Radio" is for.

(BTR would feature public domain Bach recordings, practical life advice, no-spin news analysis (or news analysis spun by Bach values), an emphasis on the bigger picture, and a segment where people call in with problems and people call in with advice and support. It would have a lighter side, and would emphasize the listener's agency.)

Academics have (or used to have) job security, and their jobs are more based in being thoughtful, relative to many other careers. They have developed a form of writing that is relaxed, even if abstruse. You have to think to understand it, and that makes you contemplative. Academic thinking is something to be sipped on in a cafe. When it denounces things, it often sounds like a kind of poem, and when academics read their writing out loud, it often sounds like the reciting of a speech, and beautiful speech is a kind of wine. Academic culture influences NPR.

Entrepreneurs have very little job security (they could always go out of business). They have to go out in the city and deal with people. Relatively few people have their backs, and relatively many are indifferent to their well-being, some directly hostile or treacherous. Business culture influences conservative talk radio.

I grew up in an academic-influenced church, which had the upsides and downsides of relaxation. I also spent some time with a church that was headed by a man who ran a business to make a living. I could sense that that church had some of the upsides and downsides of urgency.

Reality calls for urgency, but urgency is like a fruit that can go bad. Health calls for relaxedness, but relaxedness is also like a fruit that can go bad. My sense is that we need high-quality urgency, as much as possible, and when that is not possible, high-quality relaxedness. Or I think it's possible to have both at the same time.

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As I think about this some more, I'm not sure that Bach exactly has an urgent side, but I think something that is close to urgency is profundity (something I think I've heard mentioned by other listeners to Bach which I am not sure I have noticed, but which I can believe), because both are forms of connecting with importance. BTR could emphasize the profound

among its other values.

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Is life life or death? Or do we have so much abundance that we do not have to think about survival? What do the facts say? Not everyone is going to be saved, and God will feel their loss eternally. Despite the fact that God exists, some may be eternally destroyed, no longer existing -- so, dead. So we have life, and death, as possibilities in life. Therefore life is life or death.

When we try to save lives, it often can be effective to be relaxed in a productive way (whether living a Bach-like work life, or resting so that we can go back to work fresh). Relaxedness has a lot going for it. But the truth remains that life is life or death.

Labels: #J. S. Bach, #media, #mental health, #motivation, #music, #politics, #psychology

Is Full Maturity Required by Love?

%is-full-maturity-required-by-love

Wednesday, August 3, 2022

Is full maturity required by love?

Is salvation to love, or to be loved? Arguably, a loving parent would love their children by teaching them to love. It might then be odd for a parent to be content with their adult children who do not love as fully as the parent does, or at least seem likely on their way to love as much as the parent does when the child is the parent's age.

Is there an MSL reason to think that we need to love like God someday? We need to come into tune with God in order to be saved. Part of this involves our hearts being like his.

If we have an unforgiving attitude toward someone, then that prevents us from being saved. We can't perceive or relate to all people, like God can, but we can become the kind of people who would relate to each person the way God would. Then, we will love like he does. Our values will be aligned with his.

God loves the truth, particularly the moral truth, which is rooted in legitimacy, which is he himself. God loves the good, and so we must love the good. God is unilaterally inclined to forgive everyone. But we all still need to come to love the good ourselves, and if we do not, at some point he can't accept us and we can't exist anymore.

So is it the case that fully mature love is needed in order to enter God's rest? If our hearts are the same as God's, what else can we do? I'm not sure exactly what goes into the word "mature", but maybe "mature" can mean "having a heart that is inclined correctly" (perhaps inclined toward responsibility / burden-bearing). Another dimension to "mature" being "exhibiting some sort of full-grown skill, strength, security, wisdom, etc."

What's important is who we are, and thus if there's any aspect of loving as God loves that we are incapable of, then that's only a problem with what we are which God can remedy in the end if it makes sense to do so. What is up to us is to be inclined, in who we are, to love to the full extent of our abilities. This is God's love, how he loves to the full extent of his abilities. In our lives on earth, or in the Millennium, we may have to develop our abilities to act to their full extent in order to love to the full extent of our

ability to love. Sometimes in order to really love, you must become more mature, and it is a good thing to seek to become more mature, as mature as you can be insofar as love requires it.

Labels: #holiness, #love, #maturity, #morality, #spiritual growth, #truth

Petty vs. Ambitious vs. Reality-aimed

%petty-vs-ambitious-vs-reality-aimed

Saturday, August 6, 2022

Some people choose to be small. For instance, they only want money (lots of money, perhaps) and not "power". Money is power, but distinguishing "money" from "power" makes a certain amount of sense. "Power" is bigger-aimed than "money". Someone with a lot of money can rule over 100 servants or employees, but someone with a lot of power can rule over an entire nation. Someone with power might have a grand view of themselves, a noble view. This could be the case with someone with money as well, but the money person could more easily have a small view of themselves, and I would guess would be less prone to having a grand or noble view of themselves. They might then look at the "power" people as "pretentious", "ambitious", "tryhards", or something like that. The "power" people might look at them as "petty".

One would think that at the level of national government, everyone would be ambitious. This might be somewhat true. But, there can still be pettiness at that level. For instance, government corruption is a characteristically petty phenomenon, redirecting public (larger-aimed) resources for personal (smaller-aimed) purposes. But, even on the level of grandness, there can be pettiness.

If you are fighting for your own nation (tribe, religion), have you considered fighting (or working) for what is higher? What is higher than for everyone to be like God? Maybe your nation / tribe / religion has a unique insight into being like God that must be preserved and shared. Wouldn't cross-cultural, ideally interpersonal, contact involving trustworthy people do more to help that happen, than wars or other coercive actions? Wars and coercion make a stink out of you and make your beliefs seem (or even be) untrustworthy.

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The petty can say "well, yes, we are petty, but at least we are not... prideful, arrogant, self-aggrandizing, pretentious". I think that these potential twisted versions of large-aimedness are a valid concern for anyone who does not want to be petty. Any path can be well-pursued, well-implemented, or not. Was Jesus prideful, arrogant, self-aggrandizing, or pretentious? People may have thought he was, but was he? There is a way to not be petty and still not be abusive or fake.

Perhaps it is good to distinguish "ambitious" from "reality-aimed". The ambitious person wants to do large things. But it is their residual petty-mindedness that allows them, once they have done a large thing, to be twisted about it, for instance to feel or express a sense of superiority gained from it, to feel justified to do bad things because of it, or feel entitled because of it. Because if they were aimed at reality, they would be aimed at something so rigorous and total that it would call from them more than they could ever give. They could merely devote 100% to pursuing that reality.

Moral truth is satisfied only when there is no more good that needs to be done, and desires that all sentient beings are 100% in tune with the good.

Labels: #capitalism, #culture, #glory, #identity, #motivation, #politics, #power, #valuing, #work

Reciprocal Relationship with God

%reciprocal-relationship-with-god

Wednesday, August 10, 2022

When we are young, we need to feel like we are loved. We need attention, fun, and validation as well. If we are young enough, we need people to give these things to us, and it is right to provide such things for those who really have to have them. But, if those are provided in such a way that people are kept from growing up, they do serious harm and are possibly worse in the long run than if the children are not given enough attention, fun, and validation.

As we grow up, perhaps we need to be loved, or perhaps we do not. But all of us must learn to love, and that is the most important part of maturing. If we put "to love" first, we must be willing to give up "being loved".

Adult children have a kind of equality in their relationships with their parents. There is a kind of reciprocalness to the relationships. The children relate to their parents similarly to how the parents relate to them.

God is our father and he is not bound to us because we love him. He is bound to us because he loves us. So, if we are to have a reciprocal relationship with him, we should be bound to him not because he loves us, but because we love him. We someday have to love in a mature way, in order to love as God loves and have the heart that God has.

If God does not love, then he loses his legitimacy and ceases to exist. For God, to love is life or death. But he can survive not being loved.

Labels: #family, #God, #love, #maturity, #note, #relationships

Value of This Life; Life Extension

%value-of-this-life-life-extension

Sunday, August 14, 2022

This is an important topic, and maybe I haven't done it justice here, in terms of content. The form, as I re-read it, is scattered, as well. In theory I could make a better version of this, and maybe I will. But at this point, I don't have the energy/focus to. A lot of times I write these blog posts as notes to myself, which I happen to share online with some hope that others will read them, and I'll say this is one of those.

Introduction

In Establishedness and Loving God, I wrote in one of the sections about why it is valuable for people to live in this life, rather than going straight to heaven, or to the Millennium. This meant that we have a reason to not abort the unborn. Otherwise it might seem like aborting the unborn could be seen as better than letting them live in this life, so that they could be better off spiritually in the next life.

The explanation I gave there was that while the Millennium is a better place, where Jesus is king, it is a more "established" place, in which the spiritual benefits of disestablishedness are lacking.

But then I thought about how unfortunate it would be to withhold disestablishedness from people in the Millennium, if it would be spiritually beneficial. Would God let them be lost if all it would take to not be lost was some kind of difficult experience? And I thought about how it sounds like in the next life there will be bad times for those who were rich, full, and laughing in this life (Luke 6:24-25), and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in the outer darkness -- hell? or simply corrective experiences in the Millennium? As I recall, Philip Brown's opinion, for what it's worth, is that these dark passages are about the Millennium, not about hell. My sense, without doing the work to really be sure, is that ruling out the possibility that these could be only about the Millennium (the Millennium and not hell) would be difficult.

So I thought that that explanation for why it's worth living in this life (that this life is distinctively beneficial for being disestablished) is not a solid one. It should be possible for there to be disestablishedness in the next.

But then it occurred to me that this life could be valuable as an addition to

the Millennium. In other words, the Millennium is a finite amount of time, as is each of our lives in this life, and thus our lives in this life extend the work of the Millennium.

The period of time called the Millennium might be literally 1,000 years long (the Millennium gets its name from Revelation, which is a vision and might not be literal, but details in it could always happen to be literal). Let's say I live 80 years in this life, and then 1,000 in the Millennium. 80 is 8% of 1,000, or if you want to do the math differently, it could be 7.4% of 1,080. That is a decent percentage of the total time. Presumably, getting more time to mature spiritually is better than getting less -- unless this life is particularly bad for people spiritually. Maybe there are too many temptations, not enough temptations, too few anti-temptations, too many anti-temptations in some way, too few influences of any sort that make us change (the result being that we get into hardened habits), or some other problem with the environment in which we decide for or against God. It's possible that this life is bad for people spiritually, more than good, but optimistically, people do grow spiritually (become more in tune with God) in this life, something we have some evidence of, and I think at worst I would judge myself uncertain as to whether this life is so much worse than the Millennium that to live here is a net-negative. So once again, I don't think we have a clear reason to abort children for the sake of their spiritual well-being.

1,000 is much greater than 80. I would guess that 1,000, if it is not the literal number of years in the Millennium (hm... I probably should have called it the Resurrection, an alternate biblical name according to the New Wine System, for cases like this), is meant to not mislead, and so we should think of the time in the Millennium/Resurrection as being "large but finite", I would guess somewhere around the same order of magnitude if not greater. It would be weird for the Bible to say 1,000 when it really meant 1, also if it really meant 10, and also if it really meant 100. Maybe it could really be 900 or 800 years? I can't really be sure. So maybe this life matters more, or less, but probably is no more than about 10% (80/800) of the amount of life that is at play. So if a person were to be aborted, or was miscarried, it's probably only a moderate disadvantage for them spiritually, but not a stark and terrible one. Still, the ethical/practical scales are tilted toward being pro-life, at least to some extent.

MSL duration of Millennium

From an MSL perspective (MSLN without reference to the Bible), how long should we think the Millennium/Resurrection would be? It's hard to say. I would assume that since God wants to save everyone, he would allocate enough time that most people could sufficiently make up their minds to follow him (or if they want, to reject him, knowing what they are doing). But, some people would be basically eternal procrastinators, and need a

deadline to come to a decision. So, I will speculate, if I were designing this system, my naive first thought would be to allocate enough time that the non-procrastinators could make their decision, and then maybe a certain amount extra so that the procrastinators could do their relatively rapid, "night-before-the-test" changes to reach their final decision. (God might say "You have 1,000 years to fully repent and come into tune with me." and then extend the deadline to accommodate procrastinators, those who were motivated by the impending end of the 1,000 years, developed a good spiritual "velocity" at the last minute, and asked (individually or collectively) for an extension of the deadline.)

I don't know that God could predict in advance how many procrastinators there would be and exactly how long it would take the non-procrastinators to get through their decision-making processes. There must be a final deadline, because the duration of illegitimacy must be finite (God (Legitimacy) can only endure illegitimacy for a finite time for it to be illegitimate), and that deadline might be "rough", and some people could be lost at the deadline, for not being able to repent fast enough. So I don't think procrastinating on becoming holy is a good idea, and the more that people don't procrastinate, the fewer will be lost.

I still don't know how much time to guess the Millennium will be, apart from the rough clue given in the Bible. I think whatever it will be will be adequate -- generally speaking, basically -- and will be more adequate the more seriously we take the process of becoming holy.

How does this affect the math done in the previous section (80:1000)? Is the ratio between this life and the Millennium (given MSL) more like 1:10 (relatively close to 80:1000)? Is it something like 1:5? 1:2? 1:1? I can only guess based on my sense of how spiritual growth works in this life, but 1:1 is probably too fast for most people (in other words 80 years of this life, followed by 80 years of "Millennium"). The longer the "Millennium", the more plausible. 1:5 starts to feel like it might be generous. 1:10 and beyond is at least as generous as the literal-biblical 1,000 years. So, I guess this life might be as high as 80/400 (20%) or 80/480 (16%), in terms of how much of a person's development happens during it, for calculations of how bad abortion is in terms of depriving people of time in this life. A really safe assumption might be to make the "Millennium" even shorter, but it seems less plausible the shorter you get. Again, I find 80:80 to be hard to believe. This paragraph is guesswork that for me has at least that much structure.

Life Extension

Notice that prolonging a person's life gives them an advantage spiritually (important caveat: as long as this life is more spiritually beneficial than not, which I think is currently the case and probably always has been up to now). So attempts to prolong people's lives (using things like insecticide-

treated bednets to prevent malaria) could be significantly valuable even with respect to the second death, which they do not directly address. But people could end up in local environments where this life is more harmful than good spiritually. Perhaps in some seemingly utopian future, every part of civilization will be more harmful than good spiritually.

Now, in an artificial world, what if people are prolonging their lives with life extension technology, but hardening themselves in the process? They could live 10,000 years in this life -- then, the ratio given above could turn out to be 10,000:1,000 or 10:1, roughly the opposite of the biblical 80:1000. The pessimist in me says that that would be terrible, and that we should avoid doing that kind of thing. Life extension might be one of the most dangerous technologies we can develop, from a spiritual point of view. I do think we should be very careful with life extension, given that risk. But, the less pessimistic side of me hopes that even after 10,000 years of shallowness, ease, emptiness, and lack of loving, 1,000 years in the Millennium could still undo a lot of that, all of that for many people. Still, I wouldn't risk a spiritually shallow extended-life world if I were the designer of things.

(Could God extend the Millennium in response to human life-extension? I don't remember everything I may have written relevant to that, but I do think that if the "size" of God is limited, and if your past is a necessary part of who you are that only exists if it is remembered ("to be is to be perceived"), God may face a tradeoff between extending the Millennium and creating more people because he would run out of resources to remember everyone's pasts. In that case, a further argument against life-extension could be that with enough life-extension, the Millennium might have to be shortened, and that people in the era of history in which they can extend their lives would have an unfair advantage (assuming their lives brought them closer to being in tune with God) than those in the past who could only manage to live 20, 50, or 80 years. The difference between living 5 years and 80 years isn't enormous with respect to 1,000 years, but the difference between 100,000 and 5 years is, and enough 100,000 year lifespans could draw down the Millennium so that it's only 500 years long or something like that.)

What if the Millennium is actually 1,000,000 years long? I think that is consistent with the Bible calling it "1,000". The reader of the Bible could be uncertain whether it means "literally 1,000 years" or "a really big number of years; an age or eon". 1,000 years enables us to trust God to a certain extent, to expect a certain number of years for our spiritual development. So if it's at least 1,000 years, then either the "literally 1,000 years" and "age or eon" interpretations are good in terms of delivering on whatever promise we see in "1,000 years". So 1,000,000 years could be biblical. And there is no reason to think, from MSL, that a 1,000,000-year Millennium is impossible. A ratio of 80:1,000,000 is even more generous

than 80:1,000.

In that case, life extension isn't that bad, at least, if it's not extreme. But we don't know that we actually have a 1,000,000 year Millennium.

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Some of the unfairness of modern or transhuman life extension can be ameliorated (perhaps) by God not giving life-extended people as much time in the Millennium. So, if they live 500 years + the usual 80, and if the Millennium is normally 1,000 years long, they get 500 years in the Millennium. This works out okay, but not if people are extending their lives more than the length of the Millennium. This suggests that some life extension might be okay (maybe 100 or 200 years beyond 80?), as long as it's high-quality from a spiritual standpoint, such that the person whose life was extended wouldn't be at a disadvantage for missing out on the Millennium.

Another thought counterweighing the unfairness of modern or transhuman life extension, is that generally when people live less than, say 60 years, or 40, or 20, it's because their lives are hard. Disestablishedness may be better than establishedness, because it's a more ready teacher of "the cross". So they might not be at as much disadvantage as their shorter lifespans would indicate. Should we still help people in that life live longer? It's good for our spiritual well-being (all else equal), as wealthy people, to live for someone else, and we tend to have atheistic sides to us which say that "this life is all there is", so from that perspective, it still makes sense to help people live longer. From a spiritual perspective, it's for our sakes, but from an atheistic perspective, it's for theirs, and it's because it's for theirs from an atheistic perspective that it's particularly good for us from ours. But even an MSLN theist should care about alleviating unbearable suffering, because that's something God cares about. I think, spiritually speaking, there are diminishing returns on suffering beyond a certain point, and low-hanging fruit for would-be generous people to pick in their own lives by helping those who suffer.

Labels: #altruism, #futurism, #holiness, #life, #math, #valuing

MSL Holy Spirit

%msl-holy-spirit

Sunday, August 14, 2022

Epistemic status: This is valid as an explanation of MSL, but it should be compared against the Bible at some point, and I'm not at a place in my process right now to do that.

There is a recognizable Father and Son (terms taken from the Bible) in MSL, in that, in legitimism, in order for God to be legitimate, part of him had to undergo a human life (being a finite being, unaware of the many things that God is necessarily always aware of at all times), if that was possible. It is possible, if Legitimacy comprises more than one person, if the entities that make things the way they are include one who could live a finite life. So we have the "Father" (who is also the Speaker and can be partially seen through the image of the Metaphysical Organism), and the "Son" (who can go and live a finite life and face the existential situations of finite personal beings, including death).

It's more or less as though MSL predicts the existence of both Father and Son for reasons that are core to its own functioning. One can certainly think that Legitimacy can include other beings, who also create with the rest of Legitimacy. There could be an arbitrarily large number of them. Among them could be some kind of Holy Spirit. But, there is no special need to assume that there are any of these additional beings, including the Holy Spirit.

Or, maybe I can think of one for the Spirit, which wouldn't necessarily predict any other beings.

When two persons overlap, we could say that they create a new person between them. We can see this in friendships and marriages, and other relationships. In fact, a relationship and a shared spirit may often be the same thing. So, when God relates to other persons, there is a third person who comes into being between them, which is both God and the other person, and in a sense is its own thing. We could call this the Holy Spirit.

Is the Holy Spirit a person? Yes and no. Relationships are impersonal phenomena but they are also just parts of persons that are working together. What are persons, if not parts of persons who work together? So relationships are persons, persons that have two bodies? But the Spirit is part of God (the Spirit of God), like a body part. The Father is a Spirit, and his Spirit is an extension of him. So the Spirit is one being, because the Father is aware of all of his relationships with all other beings. (One could say that persons need to be one being in order to be a person, but, the

Father is that one being -- and yet the Holy Spirit doesn't perfectly reduce to him, because it is made up of our wills as well.)

Given all this, when the Father created the Son, the Spirit necessarily and automatically came into being between them. (Or, in keeping with orthodox Christianity, when the Father and Son eternally co-existed, the Spirit necessarily and automatically always existed between them.) God relates to all of us and thus the Spirit is everywhere, but his Spirit (he) can be much more deeply connected to us, depending on his unilateral action and our welcomingness (receptiveness, safeness) for him to come close to us in that way. So it makes sense to say that God sends his Spirit to people.

The more personal the Spirit is, the more it is just us relating to the Father, because all the Spirit is is the relationship between him and us. But the outer layers of a person are their powers, and when we do not know God as well, his Spirit is a taste of his power without connecting us to him as kin.

Labels: #Christianity, #God, #Holy Spirit, #what is a person?

Perfection, Control, the Small Things

%perfection-control-small-things

Sunday, August 14, 2022

In principle, the goals of perfection and control, that things turn out the best way possible, are of utmost importance (by definition). But perfection and control themselves are spiritually dangerous. Not even God perfects and controls everything, so why should we? Behaving irrationally with respect to what is best is (at least sometimes) better than being rational, if it keeps you from succumbing to perfection and control.

In order to actually do good on any big scale, and to be whole-hearted and to give all your strength, you have to trust ... something (de dicto) ... which is to some extent, or entirely, really you trusting God (de re). Otherwise you'll worry about small risks of your own life, fearful of dying, shame, failure, or others. These will make you be responsible, in a bad way. Your temporal (and, metaphorically, "spatial") horizons will be clamped down on by that responsibility. You won't be able to believe God when he appears to you, telling you to bless the whole.

In order to love, to have deep feelings and deep intentions, you have to trust.

Perhaps there is a tradeoff, between being good at being responsible for the little things, and being good at being responsible for the big things. Whether we can accomplish big things in our lives is largely up to a lot of things beyond our control, but we can approach life as people who are responsible for what is big (deep, real, the heart of the problem), and risk neglecting some of the things that are shallower, less real, less the heart of the problem. The little details that are crucial are part of something bigger.

Labels: #altruism, #love, #note, #trust, #work

"From" and "To"

%from-and-to

Sunday, August 14, 2022

Something I cut from another post:

> I think that we can locate value in what people do, and an action is both "from" an actor and "to" a goal. On the "from" side, people do things for petty reasons with petty views of themselves, or, they can do things for non-petty (ambitious? noble? something else?) reasons. (Or, in a more, or less, petty spirit, or with a more, or less, petty heart or soul.) And then when they are acting "to" a goal, that goal could be more petty, or by contrast, more large-aimed. I think that the best "from" component to action is "the cross", in some form emulating Jesus, especially insofar as he went to the literal cross. (A rough idea of "the cross".)

Labels: #motivation, #note

Humility and Giving up on Yourself

%humility-and-giving-up-on-yourself

Tuesday, August 16, 2022

Some Christians seem to believe that pride is the chief evil. Humility is also seen as one of the best virtues. It's true that pride can be dangerous, but so can a certain kind of humility.

Who is your worst enemy? Is it you? Then you have to guard against yourself, not trust yourself. Is that a Christian answer, that you are your own worst enemy? It's sometimes popular in the church, but my naive impression is that that isn't Jesus' emphasis. I feel like for him, Satan is the main enemy, and he often wants to encourage us to have confidence in ourselves. (Like telling people to go sin no more -- who does he think we are, people who can just not sin? Perhaps so.)

Who do you think hates you more, you, or Satan? Do you benefit from being your own worst enemy? You generally don't, but Satan does. Who would benefit from you falsely thinking that you are your own worst enemy? You don't, but Satan does. It takes the focus off him, and tempts you to sink into a state of giving up on yourself. This makes you less effective in doing good, which furthers Satan's agenda. If you give up on yourself, you are a conduit for a spirit of giving up on yourself, which affects other people.

If you try to be humble, you may think "poor little me" and give up on yourself. You may think that you are unworthy of holiness and thus unworthy of repenting.

You need to overcome all of your sinful habits and, most importantly, change yourself away from any way in which you do not share God's values. God can take away your sinful habits, but you are the only person who can do anything about what values you have. You are the only person who can repent (change your heart, at the level of *your* intentions and not just the feelings you have, which God could give you), and you need to repent 100%. You have time in which to do this, more than this life, but you can't put it off forever. You need to learn to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength someday. Giving up on yourself keeps you from giving your whole heart, whole soul, whole mind, and whole strength.

Pride is dangerous, but "pride is dangerous" is also dangerous. Humility is

dangerous, too, if it gets in the way of repentance.

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A related danger is that if you give up on your ability to seek the truth, you will tend to believe more lies than otherwise, and will live accordingly. You have to fight to discover or sometimes even to believe the truth.

Labels: #Christianity, #Jesus, #morality, #spiritual danger, #trust

Reading List Preview: The Long Reflection

%reading-list-preview-long-reflection

Monday, August 22, 2022

See also the postview of this reading list.

I want to think more about the Long Reflection. As I understand it, it is a search for the truth about moral values, a long process of reflective reason that seeks some kind of coordinating value set for our species as a whole.

So I want to do some readings, related to this. These readings have been chosen somewhat unsystematically. Given my resources at this time, this project will have to be provisional.

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Here are the things I want to read or re-read:

The parts of *The Precipice* (by Toby Ord) that refer to the Long Reflection. This gives a basic definition of the Long Reflection. [My copy is the hard-bound / ISBN 978-1-5266-0021-9]

> I decided that the discussion in *The Precipice* of the Long Reflection, which is brief, belongs in this preview, because it helps validate whether my concept of what the Long Reflection is (in the sense of a basic definition of the phrase) is in line with Ord's, which I'll take as either "the established view" on the Long Reflection or "likely enough basically the established view". Michael Aird, in a reading list on the EA Forum doesn't list a lot of other sources. Looking at the "long reflection" tag,
>
> {{Alt text: Screenshot from the Effective Altruism Forum. Posts tagged *Long reflection*, in order of most to least relevant as voted by EA Forum users. Some post titles truncated as in the image. *s indicate greyed titles (ones I had clicked on at that point):
> *Quotes about the long reflection by MichaelA
> Robin Hanson on the Long Reflection by Stefan_Schubert

> *Crucial questions for longtermists by MichaelA
> *Response to Phil Torres' 'The Case Ag... by HaydnBelfield
> *New book: Moral Uncertainty by Mac... by frankieaw
> Cause prioritization for downside-fo... by Lukas_Gloor
> Research vs. non-research work to i... by Magnus Vinding
> }}
>
> I see that I have read all the other articles (few in number) that are in the category (as of 22 August 2022) except Gloor's and Vinding's, and I just read the short one about Robin Hanson's views on the Long Reflection. I have listened to a majority of the podcast episodes on Aird's list, and my sieve-like memory can't support me saying the guests never saying anything to the contrary, but I feel like if they radically disagreed, I might remember that. (Similarly with the articles I read.) [I see in Hanson's post a link to another critical article on the Long Reflection by Felix Stocker. I may include Hanson and Stocker in this reading list, as well as Vinding, and maybe Gloor if I have time. Also through the EA Forum tag page, I see this post by Paul Christiano. There may be other articles not directly accessible from the EA Forum, but for a provisional post like this, I think I have done enough research. // The *Precipice* notes are in blockquotes.

A list of blog posts and EA Forum posts about normative uncertainty, the future of ethics, and moral progress:

Cold Takes (Holden Karnofsky): Defending One-Dimensional Ethics, Futureproof Ethics.

How moral progress happens: the decline of footbinding as a case study - EA Forum post by rosehadshar.

What does moral progress consist of? - EA Forum post by jasoncrawford.

Thinking Complete (Richard Ngo): Making decisions using multiple worldviews, Which values are stable under ontology shifts?

Teaching Children to Care (Ruth Sidney Charney): Where does morality come from? Maybe from teaching children to care as part of managing classroom behavior.

On the Genealogy of Morality (Friedrich Nietzsche): Where does morality come from? (Whatever Nietzsche says.)

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Here are some preliminary thoughts that I have about the Long Reflection.

Some problems I see with the Long Reflection:

I have supposed that it is a search for something that can coordinate action as a society. That means that it must be some way for all / most of us to come to the same views. I see two ways to do this. One is to find the "epistemic answer" (good reasoning) which will convince everyone / most people of the truth. The other is for everyone to agree on a pragmatic society-wide behavior, despite the fact that people disagree.

> Is it really the search for something that can coordinate action as a society? Ord says (p. 191 / ch. 7 "Grand Strategy for Humanity" section): --If we achieve existential security, we will have room to breathe. With humanity's longterm potential secured, we will be past the Precipice, free to contemplate the range of futures that lie open before us. And we will be able to take our time to reflect on what we truly desire; upon which of these visions for humanity would be the best realisation of our potential. We shall call this the *Long Reflection*--
>
> Who is "we"? "We" is a plural word which means that there is some kind of collective thinking to produce collective action. I guess from this Ord might not think that we all have to be part of the same collective, but he might.
>
> Later, same page, continuing to p. 192: --The ultimate aim of the Long Reflection would be to achieve a final answer to the question of which is the best kind of future for humanity. This may be the true answer (if truth is applicable to moral questions) or failing that, the answer we would converge to under an ideal process of reflection. It may be that even convergence is impossible, with some disputes or uncertainties that are beyond the power of reason to resolve. If so, our aim would be to find the future that gave the best possible conciliation between the remaining perspectives. [10]--
>
> In the note at the end of that passage ("[10]"), Ord discusses deal-making between the different worldviews, dividing up the galaxies between them. The "we" in question is some kind of species-wide (plus AI?) elite, maybe? And the dividing up of galaxies is coordinated action.
>
> My verdict, for now, is that the Long Reflection is conceived

of as a way to coordinate action on a very broad ("species-wide+") scale.

I think that the question of "how much would everyone agree with the Long Reflection", as a process of discovery and then of the implementation of the fruits of that process of discovery, is open and could easily be answered by "the Long Reflection will leave a lot of people out, while the pro-LR people will think they were doing the best thing for all sentience-kind, if measures are not taken against that". For instance, if the pro-LR people (the kind of people who would show up to the discussion), with their lengthy reflection come to see that people who disagree can only do so through lack of reflection, they may not have sympathy for the views of those unreflective people, and thus (therefore sort of, or really) not have full sympathy with those people.

In other words, assuming reflectiveness as the main criterion for finding values of worth is a major assumption, which can exclude the values of less-reflective people.

Ord brings up the parallel to the Renaissance in note 12 of Ch. 7. Most people weren't involved in the Renaissance, but that's how we remember that time period. So, did humanity decide, collectively, to go through the Renaissance? Or was it a (semi-intentional) band of artists, philosophers, etc. who made it happen? If you asked a random sample of people at the time "Do you want to see X, Y, Z result of the Renaissance?" what percentage would say "yes" vs. "no"? Was the Renaissance humanity's decision, or did we sort of stumble into it? The Long Reflection is trying to be more deliberate, but is it humanity (or humanity+, to include AI or even animals in the process) making the decision, or is it just a subset of humanity(+)?

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Semi-related: Is the Long Reflection a case of moral progress? We come to know the better views after "reflection"? Moral progress as a pursuit only makes sense if we know what better morals are supposed to look like, which means we have to have some minimalist a priori moral knowledge. Otherwise we have moral motion, but we have no idea if we have moral

> progress. I wonder what assumptions are baked into "reflection", which might give people a sense that they are value-neutrally evaluating moral change in such a way that they can somehow know that there has been or will be moral progress.

The problem with finding the epistemic answer is that we can't even know how to go about finding it. For instance, I personally believe that reason is the interrelationship of every piece of evidence, however gathered. To me, intuitions and things seen noetically or imaginally of all sorts are evidence. For another group of people, while intuitions are supposed to have something to do with reality, sense perceptions are weighted much more. Also, there are people who seemingly reject the idea that evidence has to come together in one whole. To them, it's fine for there to be a wider body of evidence, and then some other idea or experience that overrides everything else. We can discount evidence and reason as a whole because we have some overriding intuitive knowledge.

Who is right about the nature of reason? How do we know what the right foundation of reason is? I don't know that there is a way out of that dispute. But there might be. I feel like, despite all the skepticism that one could muster, we do have direct, unmediated access to the truth through personal experience. Each of us can be a witness to what we observe.

I think that if it is possible to come to know the truth, it partly comes from acquiring the right intuitions about how to approach reality, including how to be rational. Where do these intuitions come from? One source is through interpersonal relating. Each of the witnesses relates to each other, establishing their trustworthiness with each other both explicitly / intentionally and subtextually / by osmosis. So the Long Reflection can't be just an armchair exercise, but also one of relating to other people. How can you know that a Stone Age tribe has the wrong worldview (the wrong implicit attitudes toward reason), without at least talking to them and really seeing things the way they do? That worldview shapes their moral values.

Maybe this means that the Long Reflection will have to try to resurrect extinct Stone Age cultures, foster new ones being made, foster entirely new cultures. If subcultures of digital humans, no longer fearing death, start to believe that $2 + 2 = 5$, the Long Reflection has to consider their point of view, as well as the faction that believes that $2 + 2 = 6$.

We don't really know what rationality is supposed to be, so how can we use rationality to find the right moral values? And yet, naively, I feel like I know exactly what rationality is. So I can find the right moral values. Can't we all just be rational?

One could think of the Long Reflection as being a data-processing process. Cultures can generate an infinite number of "X is good" statements. But maybe it's a bounded infinity. Once you know how to answer the "is it 2 + 2 = 4, or 2 + 2 = 5?" question, maybe you know how to answer "is it 2 + 2 = 6?". Maybe, then, once you have talked to enough Stone Age people, you basically know the full range of their intuitions.

Normative and epistemic uncertainty can help us sort through many different worldviews. Our method of dealing with uncertainty may have a large, or even majority, determining effect on our agreed-upon beliefs, the output of the Long Reflection. But can we know how we ought to be normatively and epistemically uncertain? Could different cultures view that differently? Even if naturally, people tend to gravitate toward certain reasonable views about normative and epistemic uncertainty, couldn't there be unreasonable views that some digital human could hold, someone who isn't tethered to physical reality as essentially as we are, perhaps? (Is less affected by "physical reality bias".) How do you know that such a hypothetical person wouldn't be right, no matter how ridiculous their approach to normative and epistemic uncertainty may sound to you?

I see problems with the idea that the Long Reflection could be a sort of armchair philosophy that discovers the epistemic truth about what we should all do. The epistemic truth is something that is observed and witnessed to in the living of life. Being an armchair philosoper is living real life, but only the armchair philosophy part of it. Because people have to be involved with each other in order to produce "that which people as a whole agree on to coordinate their actions", and that involvement isn't just a technocratic "a few people observe everyone without being personally involved with them and come up with an answer for everyone", the Long Reflection has to be something that everyone works on, and has to be conceived of in the most open-minded way possible, to be open to everyone's witness to reality.

So the Long Reflection seems to have to be a partly political process. The difference between one person communicating their intuitions to another, and politics, may not be very big. We want to come to real harmony in our beliefs and intuitions, and that is part of the Long Reflection, but we also have to make decisions as a body of people. So, people trying to solve the problem that the Long Reflection needs to solve need to understand how to set up processes whereby people make pragmatic decisions together despite disagreement. Politics is the overriding of some people's witness for the sake of producing a pragmatic group decision. That sounds horrible, so it is best to produce real harmony instead.

(The overriding of the witness occurs in the implementation phase of politics, and it also chills people's witness when they internalize the thought that "someone else will decide rather than me, whether I want to or not, so I don't need to see things for myself". Politics (in general / the

politics that would compete with the Long Reflection) is ongoing / iterative. Perhaps the Long Reflection people could try to encourage people to see for themselves -- "your view / witness may someday affect what decisions we make". Particularly in cases where people are, or suspect they are even if they aren't, in a minority that can't hope to compete with the volume of mainstream opinion.)

> In a lot of cases, I would say "but we don't have time to really get everyone on board, thus the need for pragmatic decisions rather than group harmony". But the Long Reflection (*The Precipice*, Ch. 7, note 7) has an open-ended timeframe: --It is unclear exactly how long such a period of reflection would need to be. My guess is that it would be worth spending centuries (or more) before embarking on major irreversible changes to our future -- committing ourselves to one vision or another--

Isn't it possible that everyone's witness could be wrong? I don't know how to correct for that kind of systematic bias. A correction for that systematic bias could be itself compromised by however everyone is wrong. But we could remember a kind of holy fear as we go forward in our consensus, and be open for revision. The Long Reflection seems to require that at least in some practical sense, we come to The Answer once and for all, so we can go ahead and execute on moral value. But that is dangerous.

Maybe, though, we can show to ourselves that the set of moral values is a bounded infinity, and satisfy ourselves that there is no more that we can suppose about morality that we haven't accounted for? In principle, this process could work, but how could we ever know that it had really reached its completion?

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Do I honestly believe that there's no way to do armchair philosophy to find the epistemic answer? No. Being honest, I admit that I feel like it can be done.

Everyone is an armchair philosopher, already having figured out their own personal Long Reflection sufficiently to forge ahead and execute on their views of moral value.

We are (whether we realize it or not), running away from skepticism. Our method of running away from skepticism shapes what we say about reality. Here is how I run away from skepticism:

I exist. Something which is not-me exists. I personally relate to what is not-me. Everything that touches me is experience. The way experience touches things is by experiencing them, and experience, in what it is in itself

(experience) can only be touched by experience. So everything that can directly or indirectly interact with me is experience. When I relate to "all things" (everything that exists), that relationship connects me to "all things". That which connects me to all things, facilitating that relationship, is conscious of all things.

That which should not be, at all, does not exist. To be is to ought to be (at least temporarily). To ought to be is to measure up to a standard which is enforced. The standard and the enforcer are made of experience. They must connect to all things, so that all things are validated. The enforcer of a standard must be legitimate. To be legitimate requires being willing to undergo the law, if possible. The law is the standard and its makers and enforcers. If possible, the law must include, be made by, a person who lives and dies like a person, not knowing all things (this is the law we are under). So the law must be (at least) two conscious beings: one who validates and experiences all things all the time, and one who can live a life as a limited personal being. To be legitimate requires that one keep the law, and part of any ultimate moral law is that we must put it higher than anything else, and thus be willing to die for it. So the standardmakers and enforcers of the law must be willing to die for the law.

So that's the foundation of moral value: what a specific set of personal beings decided was right and wrong. This set includes one person who experiences firsthand what everyone experiences, so we know at least that much about what is right and wrong, that bad experiences are disfavored by the law which must experience what we do. And we also know that one of the fundamental values that they have and must submit to is the willingness to risk everything for the law.

But I feel a kind of fear when I write this, because couldn't someone come from out of nowhere and prove it wrong? Aren't I making some assumptions with what I write? Wasn't I taught in Western schools, shaping how I think about things? Maybe if I had been raised as an Aborigine, or in India, they wouldn't make sense. What about the as yet unimagined culture of the digital humans of the 24th century, who live on a specific part of some specific server? The outside view is terrifying and rules out any belief. But the inside view of what I have described makes sense to me. So it is my witness, and perhaps by asserting it, I force someone else into the terror of the outside view.

Perhaps I can make my ideology that of normative and epistemic uncertainty. But what is implied by that view? It's not perfectly agnostic. Here is my attempt to make it my creed:

I exist. (Uncertainty doesn't matter to me unless it's relevant to me, which requires that I exist.) (And I exist in full thickness, because the word "I" when I say it implies all of me: hopes and profound fears, all that I have done and all that I intend.) I should think that some things are knowable,

and that others are not. There are many worldviews held by many people. I don't know (I shouldn't say that I know) in advance which are correct. I should weigh all of them, considering the consequences of them supposing they are true. Somehow I should come up with some sort of guide for how I believe, act, and trust, given what I know.

I think (maybe tentatively) that the "should"s in the above paragraph are necessary either for normative and epistemic uncertainty to fit their (normative uncertainty's and epistemic uncertainty's) own definitions, or for them to be used as an input into finding moral guidelines. But all those "should"s make me ask, do we know that we have enough of a foundation for normative and epistemic uncertainty (the epistemic practice), in order to even begin with normative and epistemic uncertainty?

We could say "Well, we're just uncertain about moral and epistemic uncertainty. It's uncertainty all the way down." One thought that occurs to me is that the methods by which we evaluate uncertainty, are things about which we might have uncertainty. If uncertainty says "there's an X% chance, given uncertainty, that uncertainty is itself valid", maybe we spawn a meta-uncertainty about uncertainty. But that meta-uncertainty has a Y% chance of being valid. Now, X and Y are each between 0 and 1. So every layer of meta-uncertainty is multiplying increasingly many numbers between 0 and 1, which, mathematically, should eventually produce an infinitesimal / Pascalian number -- effectively zero, even if technically non-zero. (The implication being that stacking uncertainties and meta-uncertainties high enough undermines all of our credences, leaving us no way to rationally prefer an action over another.)

But maybe math is the wrong way to evaluate these things? I feel like not everything is math-apt, something which I see most clearly with Pascal's Mugging and the difficulty of defining exactly what is a Pascalian or non-Pascalian non-zero number. Maybe we can escape from the math? (Or maybe I've messed up some detail in the previous paragraph.)

Assuming that we can't escape from the math, is there any way to come up with the certainty needed to get a worldview of normative and epistemic uncertainty off the ground, such that we can use it to live our lives? Let's say that you are an uncertainty-using person, read the previous paragraph and say "Your explanations sound like they make sense, but I can just intuitively tell that normative and epistemic uncertainty makes sense to practice. I have some kind of certainty that can ground that method. I don't know where it comes from, but I have it." If you don't know where it came from, should you trust it? I'm not sure you can be certain either way. But I think from my own experience, there are things I can be certain about. For instance, I can see the computer screen of my laptop (and at this moment, you are likely looking at one as well, or that of some other device, or printed words on a page). We see images that are words, the words that I am typing right now. I am 100% sure that I am seeing the

words that I'm typing. Similarly, if I see a cup on a table, I see a cup. No amount of philosophy makes the cup anything other than a cup. I could name it something else and think of it as having a different function. But the object, whatever its meaning to me, would remain, and I could see it, touch it, and so on, and interact with it as part of my ordinary human life. So maybe we can be certain about the validity of a worldview of normative and epistemic uncertainty, (be certain on the level of meta-certainty) in the same way. We just see it. If other people don't see it, maybe they don't have the equivalent of a cup on the table in front of them. I wouldn't be concerned if a blind person said they couldn't see something I saw. Or if a young person didn't understand my perspective, having not lived through the unique experiences I've lived through. I would go on having my perspective, understanding that they don't understand what I do. This sounds like a case of "some people witness some truths, others others".

Now it looks as though, given the above, that the very worldview of normative and epistemic uncertainty is something that is witnessed, and is not an absolute frame that can be relied on to form top-down judgments about reality.

--

However, let's look at the problem of meta-uncertainty again. What's going on when we evaluate the uncertainty and meta-uncertainty of something? Well... *we* exist, we *evaluate*. These are elemental actions that go into any reasoning about uncertainty and validity. Just as I can in complete reality reach for the cup on the table, I can in complete reality reach out, in my mind, to an uncertainty, which is a thing that is not me. What does it mean for "we" to exist, and for us to "evaluate"? We are applying a standard, and a standard about standard-application. These things (or at least enough of them) we know like we know that in this sentence there is the word "that". We have the standard in even our uncertainty, and through the standard we can be uncertain. So, a standard exists, absolutely, regardless of meta-uncertainty. Meta-uncertainty, and thus would-be self-destructive meta-uncertainty, has no validity without the standard.

So we exist, each of us in our own full-fledged personhood, and a standard exists. A standard validates each standard, so it's standards all the way up. We can see that the chain is valid, because we know that arguments can be invalid, 100% invalid. These standards cannot be argued with. There is no infinite regress of standards that validate standards, because there is a meta-standard that immediately validates all other standards. So this is moral value. And what can we know about it? (At this point, maybe just the things from my personal belief system, like that it must live up to itself, put itself first in such a way that it risks itself, and subject itself to its own laws, and even that it be a conscious being.)

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I'm currently planning to read Nietzsche, who I think will provide a cynical, weird, and (perhaps) implausible account of how morality came to be, as well as Charney, from whose book I can make a laminar, reasonable, and plausible (possibly "just-so") account of how morality comes to be. Despite Nietzsche's weirdness and (likely) wrongness, I think he will problematize "genealogy of morality" more vividly than Charney, who after all (I assume) isn't trying to talk about where morality comes from.

If morality comes from somewhere -- somewhere political, or from evolution -- does that make it invalid? Is the concept of morality even worth defending, if it has nothing to do with what is real, and is simply an artifact of how humans choose to program humans, or how human biology gives us certain instincts? Why even care about maximizing value? Most or perhaps even nearly all of us have natural instincts to seek value. But why should we care? Could we just get rid of them, or let them wither away? I have reasons for caring, because I believe that standards / law / morality / legitimacy have their own existence, and in themselves inherently call for them to be made first. "Should" refers to something real which I directly experience, and which must in some form come before any events in a genealogy of the morality we currently have.

The Long Reflection is what (more or less) apolitical people would favor. The "rough and tumble" (brute force) political process is what often runs the world. People who care about the Long Reflection probably would or ought to care about how "values are created" through the application of socially mediated psychological power. Nietzsche connected with brute force things, and maybe his book will have discussions of them. If morality is something that is witnessed, then teachers have a special witness to children as they "teach them to care". The "physics" of teaching people may be a limit on what things they can be taught, especially when what is being taught is conducive to the teaching process. It could be that the Long Reflection would favor beliefs that are practical to spread and believe, and that are conducive to the education process. It could do so by being agnostic(-enough) about value and not do anything, and then lo and behold, education-aligned values would outcompete ones that go against education. (Or, "education as practiced by the 21st, 22nd, etc. century education system".) If the Long Reflection people say "X is best", but everyone else says "Y is best", probably Y will be done. If the Long Reflection is careful and diffident, political and educational actors will not be, and it may be difficult for Reflective people to effectively object, if they feel like they ought to.

(So should the Long Reflection have some political muscle of its own? Probably it would have to find a way to be culturally competitive, or better, connect with everyone in a non-competitive but thoroughgoing way, without compromising its own process.)

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Here's an earlier attempt to address the same topic as this, with a lot of overlap [now the blockquote indicates something other than content responding more or less directly to *The Precipice*]:

> # (Troubling?) Questions for the Long Reflection
>
> This is a draft of a post I would have posted to the EA Forum. My (preliminary) answers to the issues raised in it are in []s.
>
> --
>
> The Long Reflection is a time in which we will (may) try to find the best possible values, so that we can propagate them through space and time far into the future. We don't want to mess up this process, because if we do, we will forego a lot of value (or cause a lot of disvalue).
>
> I like the thought of trying to search for the best values, and I also like using reason and reflection to do so. I'm a religious person and the kind of approach to religion I like is (aspires to be) rational and reflective. I like thinking of the Long Reflection as a time where we finally get to the bottom of what is good in all of human culture.
>
> But I feel like there are some potential important questions to answer about whether the Long Reflection is even feasible.
>
> --
>
> What is the best way to go about finding the best values? Does reflection actually help? Should we use reason?
>
> [My working definition of "reason" is the "interrelationship of all evidence / premises, however we gather them". Reflection is that processing that enables us to interrelate. If we want to talk about the truth as a whole, then it looks like reason is how we know the truth. In principle, reality is a whole and thus is known through reason. It's hard to imagine reality (that which may become relevant to us) not being a whole of some sort. I am not sure this 100% proves that reason and

reflection is the best way to go about finding the best values. But maybe it lends enough weight to reason to favor it. Also, a big part of "reason" involves saying "this is a valid premise, but that is not" and so "reason" can be a loaded term, loaded with "what the habitus of the people speaking consider acceptable or unacceptable as premises". It's not as clear that our culture's loading of "reason" produces a "reason" which is the way to go about finding the best values. Similarly with "reflection". We think about what are reflective people? What is the vibe of a reflective person? Isn't there a bias there?]

Can we prove that non-reflective thinking is less reliable than reflective thinking?

Can we prove that irrational thinking is less reliable than reflective thinking?

Assuming we are rational, I suppose we have premises and logic, which lead to conclusions. Where do we get our premises from? In areas of value, many of our premises seem to come from interpersonal relationships. Will we try to interpersonally relate with all kinds of people in order to inform our premises? (In principle, I don't see why not, although in practice it might or might not be feasible.)

Whose minds are we trying to make up?

If we don't try to make up everyone's minds substantially in accord with our own, then are we going to force the consequences of our ideas on them against their will / preferences when we start to implement policies based on the conclusions of our Long Reflection?

If we do try to make everyone's minds up, can we deal with obstacles like "different, supposedly rational versions of reason" (for instance, the idea that you can have the entire world of truth, and then some other basic belief that is not part of that interconnecting world of truth takes precedence over it and that's just fine -- (a thought inspired by Alvin Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief*, which I think says something similar).

Our intuitions about what are true, the bedrocks of reason,

come from culture and biology. What happens when we can change biology freely? Can we have a coherent definition of what is rational, if future biological brains, or AI, or digital humans, have radically different intuitions about what is rational? Should we defer to them as being more rational than us, or insist that we are more rational than them for some reason? Or take a kind of normative / epistemic uncertainty approach, where we can find a way to consider all the different possibilities and "collapse it down" into concrete action? How many different rationalities can be evolved? Is it possible to take them all into account to form a practical rationality (one which we can act on)?

(One version of rationality is based on something like Yudkowsky's illustration of the shepherds, where one character ignores physical reality, dies, and is thus not represented in the gene pool. But what if a) we don't think that this life is the only one, or b) just don't care about non-existence? What if the actual best values are to not exist? Or if values themselves don't matter? Can anything constrain our definition of what is rational then?)

[The Yudkowsky story can be found here.]

If we come to figure out what the best values are, will we freeze cultural evolution so that new values are not evolved? How would we do that? Maybe we want to ensure that we have considered all possible values before doing that. Is that possible?

Will thinking about values be dominated by "epistemic utility monsters"? (Hell being maybe the ultimate one.) Will all our values be based on "avoiding the worst possible hell as proposed by religion X"?

If you look at human beliefs currently, you see the unfortunate scenario that there are two huge religions that preach hell (some form of Christianity and some form of Islam), and these two religions seemingly teach very explicitly that either "You have to accept a God who is somehow more than one person" and "You cannot accept a God who is more than one person." Apparently there is no right answer. Naively it looks like you just flip a coin between the two of them, and hope you guessed right (although their adherents

are convinced that there are reasons to pick one side over the other). Is there a rational way to "gate off" Islam and Christianity, to where their competing infinite disutilities do not affect how we think rationally at all? Or to determine that one of them is more rational than the other, and is the one we should actually follow? But then, what if someone evolves a new religion, consisting of 1,000 adherents, and they also have a belief in hell? Are they less valid for only having 1,000 adherents? What if the religion only has 1 adherent? Could someone make up an ad hoc religion to push whatever value they care about? Would there be any way to rule out that they should be taken seriously?

Mentioning the tactic of making up ad hoc religions leads to the question of "is what this is all about more a competition of preferences"? Instead of using reason, using rhetoric, or stronger psychological force. Will the Long Reflection become, rather than a search for the truth that's "out there", more of a political process whereby people promote their own values, whatever they may be, which is to be "won" by whoever can? Maybe this warrants a different name than "Long Reflection", but would go on at the same time and contest some of the same issues, and perhaps the two processes would fight each other. How, and why, would reason be safeguarded against personal preference?

--

I'm not sure that these questions can't be answered in a way that allows the Long Reflection to go forward, but they seem like things that might be a problem.

Some guesses where to find answers: I didn't finish reading the Sequences, so maybe that addresses these issues? As mentioned, wrestling with "alternative rationalities" like Reformed epistemology or maybe something in Buddhism.

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I think that's all I have to say on the topic for now, so I will see what I see in the readings.

Labels: #altruism, #Alvin Plantinga, #book review, #education, #Friedrich Nietzsche, #futurism, #metaethics, #morality, #philosophy,

#politics, #rationality, #religion

Book Review Preview: On the Genealogy of Morality

%book-review-preview-on-genealogy-of

Monday, August 22, 2022

See also the review.

In the preview for the Long Reflection reading list, I wrote some about what I want to get out of my reading of *On the Genealogy of Morality* by Friedrich Nietzsche (translated by Carol Diethe, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson).

Other than that, I think I will add that my approach will be, over all, to see what the text provokes me to say in a fairly open way (not intentionally hold onto the agendas I already have, but let the agendas come up naturally as I read).

Labels: #book review, #Friedrich Nietzsche, #morality

Book Review Preview: Teaching Children to Care, by Ruth Sidney Charney

%book-review-preview-teaching-children

Tuesday, September 6, 2022

See also the review.

In my review of *X-Risk*, I mentioned that I wanted to read a book called *Teaching Children to Care* by Ruth Sidney Charney.

It looks like it's about teaching children to behave, but maybe also to care. Apparently, we are taught to be moral and don't have an inherent desire to do the right thing. Or maybe we do and that inherent desire has to be elicited from us through discipline or other education.

It's interesting to think of morality as something that can be learned, that is taught. When we see evildoers, maybe they are just untaught? (Maybe sometimes that is a point of leverage.) What kind of teaching actually works? Or maybe adults are too old to learn morality?

This book might give some clues as to how teachers approach ethics and metaethics. They need ethics to make the classroom function, but how do they ground those ethics? Do they try? I assume that elementary students (which from the cover picture appear to be the people who are to be taught to care using methods like this book) are not taught explicit ethical and metaethical reflection, or at least not in a very developed way. So then maybe the moral values, instincts, intuitions, that develop in the students through a sort of mechanical process (an "ethicogenesis" (word I just made up), about which one could write a genealogy of morality, perhaps) "mellows" into this "time immemorial Right and Wrong", unconnected to any metaphysical source or legitimacy. Morality can be treated as software rather than truth, and it is installed by parents and teachers. (Maybe one could say that the software, down the line, programs teachers to install it on new "systems").

So this might help explain why people can be so ethical in how they react to things or view the world, and yet be uninterested in the grounding of ethics.

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Later: it occurs to me to be interested in how it is that children are trained to be moral -- to be aligned with the teacher's / society's values. Is there a connection to AI alignment (maybe not something that would help AI safety researchers, but interesting nonetheless)? Both children and neural nets are trained, rather than programmed.

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Also later: a classroom is a family (for a broad definition of "family"), and in a family, what other people want is inherently right or wrong. The rules are constructed, by someone who cares for you and knows better than you. The rules are also constructed in the sense that they are up for human revision and are binding within the group as a group. They are supposed to be fair because that's how humans are supposed to make rules. Children desire to be treated fairly, so that's how the rules are supposed to be. Rules are endemic to groups of people who relate to each other, and are not free-floating moral things (moral "particles" or "force fields").

So a more "reality" or "truth" approach to rules, as opposed to a "family" one, is foreign to the classroom and to most people's lives.

Labels: #book review, #childhood, #education, #metaethics, #morality

Why Must the Past be Remembered?

%why-must-past-be-remembered

Wednesday, September 7, 2022

This post is in "essay" format where I try different things, some successful and some unsuccessful (which I guess at this point, to be honest, is what I am choosing because I think there might be some value in the parts that I would otherwise cut, but I'm too tired to figure exactly what's good about them).

I will try to answer the question "why must the past be remembered?" by considering how it might constitute who we are, and also how it is part of the truth. Also, how it might in large part constitute the present.

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In Size of God, Part 2, I wrote that what makes a person who they are includes their life history.

Is this true? In what sense of "life history" is it true?

It certainly is the case that cultural memory is part of what makes a nation "who" it is. Cultural memory is an account of the past which may or may not be what literally happened, which forms part of a culture's identity. Individual people are like nations with a population of one, and there is a kind of "personal cultural memory" to each person.

How thick is this? (How much memory does it take to store it, for instance?) In my case, it's pretty thin. I don't have a strong sense of personal history or identity. However, I suppose there are a few things I can say about myself if I'm explaining my life and who I am, which I think are important to say.

These things present to me as being the truth about my past. But, what is the whole truth about the past? Doesn't it include many, many more details than I can remember? Even people with a thick personal cultural memory remember far less than what actually happened.

So if my personal cultural memory claims to be about the past, can it be correct in making that claim if less than the full past informs it?

For me to be a completely legitimate being, perhaps I need to be able to tell the truth in all things, and so I could only have a personal cultural memory if there was a complete record of the past, not necessarily

consciously possessed by me, but at least by God, who could validate it by apprehending all things and affirming me when I say that what happened happened.

In order for me to be anyone at all, I must claim "this is who I am" with 100% definiteness -- it's part of what I sense when I say "I", is implicit in my saying "I". I make this claim during my life, but I'm sometimes wrong, because I can't access my past. My concept of my past does not line up with God's concept, both because of this ignorance, and because I have not fully come into tune with him, so that if I look at any part of my past, I do not judge it the way he would. (I'm guessing that the Millennium is a time in which people face their pasts.) But once I have come to terms with my past as it actually is/was, I will be able to say "this is who I am" with 100% definiteness and 100% truth, and thus 100% legitimacy.

I think part of who I am is accessible through what I intuitively refer to when I say "I". That "I" contains my whole past. "My whole past" refers to "every decision I've made" and "that I failed to choose to make decisions over stretches of my life", among other things.

It could be the case that God's personal cultural memory requires that he remember everything that goes into us becoming ourselves. We can construct a simplified cultural memory, but he has to remember the truth as it actually happened. I have some awareness of the history of England and can form a rudimentary identity of the country. There is an "American's identity of England" in me, and perhaps similar but different ones in other Americans. These have something to do with us Americans, and something to do with England itself, and how English people see themselves. God has such cultural memory / identity for each of us, and he has to see it according to his character, which is truthful. It was part of his life that we went through all the things we went through, and those events were significant to him, because they were part of how we came to be... whatever we are going to end up being, but hopefully to become completely legitimate like him.

Is the truth something that is inviolable, such that to delete it is to falsify something and break legitimacy? This makes some sense from a Biblical Christian perspective. God wants to forgive us, so he must send his Son to die. But, why not just delete the past, if that's an option? But he had to send his Son to die.

I think the above reasons are satisfying enough for me for now, to basically say that the truth makes up who we are and is also inviolable.

But, this raises a question for my concept of heaven given the possibility that the "size" of God is finite (see here). How can we have eternal life if God will run out of memory to store the truth? I had thought that the answer was to keep all the memories that go into who we are, but that

since in heaven, nothing affects who we are, God could delete memories formed in heaven from time to time.

Wouldn't this introduce falsehood? Maybe it would be okay if God intended to keep all the memories, but ran into one of his own limitations, and so took the least-falsifying route, which would be to leave our earthly and Millennial histories untouched, but delete some heavenly history to allow us all to keep living. God must intend the best, but can be kept from doing the best by some limitation or other.

But then, why not just delete all of our pasts, to have even more people in heaven? From the reasons given in the post, this would make it so that we couldn't truthfully say who we were.

So some memory is off-limits for deleting, the memory having to do with who we are. So once we are in heaven, who we are can't change.

This is not too big a deal to say with respect to our characters, how we are aligned with God. Once our hearts are like God's hearts, we can't change and wouldn't want to.

But who you are involves more than just your character. It also involves identity.

I am (more or less) an American. Let's say, in the following hypothetical, that I died without ever having eaten Mexican food, having heard Mexican music, participated in any Mexican holidays, and so on. And I continued through the Millennium somehow without ever encountering a Mexican person or a Mexican thing. In heaven, let's say I spend 20,000 years with Mexicans, eating Mexican food, dancing Mexican dances, visiting heavenly replicas of Mexican ruins and of what those ruins were in their unruined state, speaking Spanish to Mexicans and listening to them talk about things in Spanish in a Mexican way. I fully immerse myself in Mexican culture. At the end of the 20,000 years, am I at all Mexican in who I essentially am? No. Those were just interests I had, choices I could unmake.

"Having interests" in a temporary and non-essential way is different from something being part of who you are. Those 20,000 years will fade away as God (and everyone else) forgets them. We all know that they will go away, so we don't hold onto them. For 20,000 years I can be a Mexican, and perhaps I can be a Mexican for all time, cycling through temporary years. But I could always cease to be Mexican -- but, whether I like it or not, to the extent that being American has already seeped into who I am, being American will be with me at all times now and forever.

The freedom to forget these phases or their earlier parts allows us to keep existing. But the memories that make up our character as aligned with God have to be protected. Was it *we* who really decided to follow Jesus? Whoever it was who made that decision, it had better be us. All the steps

of repenting are decisions that *we* made, in the past. How was it that we, in all our particularity derived from everything we have experienced, including the memories we had in the past, come to choose to trust and obey God? God has to remember this to know for certain that it was *we* who repented, and not someone else.

Perhaps God could look on us in heaven and see that we never sin anymore. Was it the case that *we* chose to be against sin, or was it rather the case that we were given a sinless nature? How can we know a person if not to observe their behavior? If we could simply be given good natures, then God would have, and we would never be subjected to life on earth, only granted life in heaven. It is our decisions that make us who we are. God can know that it was we who decided to become who we are, if he remembers the moments in which we made those decisions, and everything that fed into those moments.

If God doesn't know who we are, he can't trust us fully, and must make us make all those decisions over again, to prove that it wasn't just that we had good natures.

What if God deleted the memories of the pasts that led to our salvation, but kept a note to himself saying "I can trust myself, and since I had seen how these people were as good as their behavior, I don't need to remember the decisions that went into that."? But those memories make up part of who God is. How could God know who he was without them? Without the memory, he couldn't be certain that he was legitimate, and thus he would cease to be legitimate and cease to exist. If legitimacy can't trust itself, it is not legitimate, because what is truly legitimate is 100% trustworthy to legitimacy, and legitimacy itself must be truly (100%) legitimate. His own legitimacy comes from his decisions.

But he could infer from the fact that he was able to delete the memories that he was trustworthy and legitimate, because if he wasn't legitimate, nothing would exist anymore. He had been 100% legitimate up to the point in time when he deleted the memories.

So perhaps God can delete the memories of our past.

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Another argument for why our memories must be preserved: While in one sense, the only thing that exists is the present, in another sense, the past exists. It's like if you have a book that exists only in the present, but the pages store the memories of the past. In the world of the pages, the past exists. We live in the world of the pages, and what makes us who we are exists in the world of the pages. I suppose the pages make God legitimate, which enables him to validate the book that stores all experience, including the pages.

If the past really exists, then I "currently" (book perspective) exist in the "past" (pages perspective), as much as I do in the present. Thus, who I am depends on who I was and how I became who I am now. My present depends on a chain of past selves, experiences, and experience bodies, all of which (book perspective) currently exist, written on pages. For them to be deleted makes it impossible for me to be who I am. But, once I have fully become who I am, to delete subsequent pages does not threaten my legitimacy, and I can safely exist, though pages are forgotten. Maybe it's like the author has fully developed the character's perspective, and after that, everything is fan fiction. The fan fiction can explore all kinds of possibilities, but can never change the canon interpretation of the characters. In this fan fiction, the characters always act in character with the canon version of them, but are in all kinds of other scenarios. This fan fiction can be periodically deleted when the server runs out of storage space.

If my present self in the book requires all the past pages to be what it is, then I suppose in heaven, when the pages are cut from the book, they must be pared back from the latest pages back to some earlier point, perhaps to the beginning of God's rest (heaven) (if the book ends at p. 3,502, and heaven begins on p. 2,580, pp. 2,581 - 3,502 are all to be deleted), rather than, as I originally thought, leaving a gap between the last remembered page and the beginning of heaven (there can't be a gap, leaving any later page unsupported by all the pages leading up to it).

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Does the past cause the present? I suppose the only thing it doesn't cause in the present are the decisions being made in the present. If the past causes (most of) the present, how can it do that if it (the past) doesn't exist? Maybe it does exist. It could be a "page", still in the book, still existing, and cause (most of) the present.

I am aware that there is quite a bit to the philosophy of time, but I'm not aware all of what has been said there. I like the image of, everything exists in the present, and the past is simply a feature of the present. This preserves the past while sticking to my preference of "the only thing that exists is the present". I think the "pages in a book" theory of the past is possibly true.

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So overall, I think that the past must be remembered by God, and thus take up space in his memory -- or, it's possible that that is true -- I feel, right now, that it likely is true. If God is finite in "size", there is a limit to how much memory can be stored, and a certain amount is needed for each of us to develop to the point of being able to live with God forever.

Labels: #heaven, #history, #identity, #life, #time, #truth

How Bad Can Satan Negotiate Reality to Be?; Tastes vs. Values

%how-bad-can-satan-negotiate-reality-to

Thursday, September 8, 2022

14 July 2023: added a note at the end.

I already wrote one post about how can we trust God given MSLN theodicy.

Epistemic status: I don't know much about economics / labor relations in general, or the areas of those particularly related to this post.

I was thinking today [when I drafted this] that if God negotiates with Satan, what if that means that Satan manages to make it so that there's no Millennium? I would assume that God would institute a time after this life for us, because he wants us to be saved, and very few of us are ready in this life. But would God get to have what he wanted? Or would Satan have a strong-enough hand in negotiations to cripple God's ability to act on his love?

In the negotiation process, God has the ultimate power. He can choose not to go ahead with creation. Let's say God and Satan are negotiating over the terms of a "temptation contract". This is needed before we are created. God can simply wait for a favorable contract. But, God really wants to create us, and needs Satan to volitionally empower temptation. It is better to create us than to not create us, so God has an incentive to allow Satan to have power.

What does Satan get out of the contract? Mainly, the satisfaction of doing evil [other rewards mentioned later in this post]. What does God get out of it? Temptation, which helps us become holy. God can run a cost-benefit analysis and see exactly how much benefit he can expect to get from temptation. If the cost from Satan exceeds the temptation, he simply will not ratify the temptation contract.

Temptation allows people to enter God's rest (/ heaven), by causing them to choose more deeply to reject sin and choose God instead. It would be counterproductive to institute temptation in a way that costs people's ability to enter God's rest through repentance. This puts a ceiling on how bad the world can turn out to be. But, I think if, say, 1,000 people fully repent in their hearts in this life and thus do not need the Millennium to

be saved, and everyone else is lost, that's still a net positive. That's not very reassuring.

I imagine God thinking of strategies to elicit good terms from Satan. One thing to note is that "Satan" is really a class of evil beings. So God can choose between competing offers coming from evil beings.

I guess it's possible that there's only one evil being, but if there was, that being would have a strong hand in negotiating, and would probably make a world worse than this one currently is. It seems very unlikely to me that evil is an idea that would only occur to one being, and also, that God would put himself in a position where he only had one evil being rely on to will temptation.

So, if there are competing evil beings, there's a kind of "race to the bottom" to produce better and better evil-affected worlds. In human labor relations, people have some low price (in a globalized world, perhaps very low for some workers) below which they will not offer their labor. They need to be paid enough to buy food, for instance. This sets an effective floor on wages. So, would there be a floor to how good the world could be, given the personal needs of evil beings? In other words, while for Jesus, his bread was doing God's will, and for us, our bread can be literal food, for demons, bread is something like... sadistic enjoyment? the exercise of the will to power? feelings of superiority? a sense of security (derived from job security, perhaps)? the satisfaction of spoiling things for God? ... probably something like that. Some of these listed are not necessarily evil, but let's say all demons hold out for at least some evil inflicted on the world. There's some minimal amount of this that the most "scab-like" of demons would demand, and this sets the basic price (of evil) for temptation.

What if that brings us back around to "only 1,000 people are saved"? What if that's the wage floor? I think we have a kind of anthropic principle going here. Since we exist, generally speaking, our set-up (the way the world works) is favorable to all of us being saved in the end. God wouldn't create us if that weren't possible.

Does that mean that Satan's intrusions in our timeline (i.e. the Lisbon earthquake, fawns burning in the forest as in William Rowe's paper, the Holocaust, the depravity of human nature) have zero ability to lead us to hell? That doesn't seem likely. For instance, the problem of evil has led some people into atheism and lack of trust of God. But maybe in the Millennium (or even partly by posts like this very one, which support theodicies) it's relatively easy to convince atheists that God exists and there's a point to seemingly gratuitous evil. So it's not as fatal to people coming to God as it might seem. But I think that at least some atheists get stuck on their distrust of God, which was first taught to them by their reaction to the problem of evil, and if they stay stuck, they might harden and be lost.

I think it's possible for God to say "While Satan's intrusions (/ negotiated features of the world) might contribute to people going to hell, I can't predict a priori whether that will happen in each person's case before exposing them to those intrusions, and therefore it's in the realm of risk, rather than 'unforced error' if I go ahead with this creation." An "unforced error" being allowing Satan to negotiate for a world in which it simply isn't possible for more than some small number of people to be saved. In other words, it is obviously a bad idea for God to create us if he knows for sure that any of us will definitely be lost if he creates, and that would be the case if there was no Millennium.

How do we know that God doesn't want us to be lost? One intuition comes from the image of "father". God is a person who brings persons into the world. God loves. God is legitimate, and his legitimacy makes him God. As part of that legitimacy, he values all that is valuable, and whatever good there is in us, he values. To love is to value a personal being as a personal being, which is what that being is. So God loves the persons he brings into the world.

Loving beings do not want any of the people they love to be destroyed. God will feel grief over their loss, if they are lost. In the end, that grief will not be unbearable because in the end, there can be no unbearability. But it will still be grief. But the emotional cost is not primarily what means that God does not want us to be lost. Rather, it is his love for us. He loves each of us, and so does not want any of us to be lost. Better that we never exist than that we be lost. People who do not yet exist are only faint ideas, and if they are foregone, there isn't much lost. God will create as many people as he can, but not regret the ones he can't make -- there isn't an infinity of potential people, only the amount that God can make. But people who do come to exist are real, and there are real stakes for their well-being.

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Let's assume that evil beings come from some kind of process that God can repeat. He can destroy the old evil beings (at some pain to him, if there's some good to them) and "roll up" some more evil beings. The most scab-like of these evil beings could give us a world that is actually very nice. The only evil other than temptation (and where we go given that temptation) being something like the occasional head cold. Why don't we live in this world? Couldn't God have held out until we got that lowest-bidder demon?

One possible reason why not is because to truly will temptation in every circumstance where it can be called for (which is what is needed in the temptation contract) is an act of profound evil, and that the fact that the world that we live in is not far worse than it is, is due to the "race to the bottom". It may be the case that there is an absolute floor to how evil a being can be and still will all temptation, and such a being would not sell

their evil will for less than a certain evil reward.

But, couldn't it be the case that evil is its own reward? If that were so, then couldn't there be a lowest-bidder demon who would sell their work as a tempter as cheap as just willing temptation? Perhaps an evil demon would hate that good comes out of temptation, and require extra evil to go through with the contract as compensation. It's like if there was a volunteer position that was its own reward to the class of people who were suited to working on it. This volunteer position was their only way of advancing their tastes/values in the world. But it had a side effect that went against their tastes/values. None of them could be motivated to take the volunteer position unless there was some compensation for the side effect. The compensation would be to cause more of an advance in their tastes/values.

Does that illustration make sense? I guess if I were in the demons' position, I could see myself taking such a volunteer position and making the same demands.

The demon is being rational and calculating to some extent by demanding extra evil as compensation for the good that results from temptation, but not being fully rational, or else they would demand enough evil to almost cancel out the good done. But for some reason, demons seem to be selling their labor for less than it is worth, by not getting the full compensation for their efforts.

This is (basically?) the same as when human employees sell their labor for less than what it is worth, which is common and kind of odd when you look at it in an alien light. Why do humans do that? Probably because they are not fully rational. Businesses can find workers who are not fully rational, but who are partially rational and thus demand some wages. Humans have various psychological factors that compete with "seek your own well-being as effectively as possible", and one that demons might have is their lust to do evil. Demons are lustful, and could be impatient and pragmatic, wanting to just get some kind of evil done rather than pushing for some kind of pure and thoroughgoing evil that might fully instantiate their values or tastes. It only takes one relatively petty-minded demon to sign a temptation contract that leaves a lot of good in the world, but maybe the lust for evil in demons runs strong enough that there is a floor to how good the world can be, given their ability to negotiate for compensation.

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I notice myself using "tastes" and "values" as semi-interchangeable above. I think that they can work similarly in that they can both motivate people to set up an axiology (an ordering of what is best) but that to have tastes has a significantly different tonality than to have values. "Taste" speaks of

enjoyment, consumption, preference satisfaction, being pleased, and in some cases, of lust, while "value" speaks of idealism, self-giving, and (I would say) love.

Perhaps, in a Buberian way (like his "evil is not whole-souled" or "you can't worship God by using the same kind of worship you give an idol and just swap out your idol for God"), to will evil is a matter of tastes and not value. When the intensity of your valuing increases (perhaps), the greater your self-giving and idealism and (true) loving. But when the intensity of your "tasting" increases, the greater your impatience and thus pragmatism, and your hunger, and your lust. So a truly "great" (intense) evil willing is one that is done lustfully, and thus impatiently and pragmatically, costing the evil-willer the ability to inflict a truly rational-scale intense evil.

Now, demons may be crippled by their own lusts, but humans who have been deceived by demons can misguidedly pursue through value what is actually worthless or dangerous and thus bring great evil into the world, in effect. In terms of raw intent and desire, it's hard to beat a demon for evilness, although perhaps there are some people who seem to be possessed by demons but are actually on their side and match them both for the vehemence and impatience of their evil. But in terms of consequences, humans are better instruments of greatness, and the effects of greatness can be both good and bad.

(Notice that demons crippled by their own lusts still manage to demand things like wild animal suffering, earthquakes that kill thousands of people, and the presence of psychological evil (demonic possession / mental illness / personality disorders / urges toward killing and raping, etc.), on a scale that makes life gratuitously miserable for many beings, sometimes horrifying and offending people so that they reject God. Perhaps demons still have us beat as far as causing evil. But perhaps there are evil outcomes that only can be attained if we "semi-wittingly" or unwittingly help them come about.)

Our preferences, deep in who we are and not just as they express themselves through what we are, have a tonality to them. We are not "bloodless" in who we are, and there we either love, value, have tastes for, or lust (or prefer in some other way I haven't thought of).

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I like what I've written so far, but it doesn't satisfy me. I still feel like somehow God could roll a minimally-evil demon to fulfill the temptation contract. He is patient and reality-aimed, and simply needs time before he can get a demon like that.

However, one thought occurs to me that might explain why God might have to choose a demon without waiting for the ideal demon. The "size" of God may be finite, in that he may have finite memory. In order to

remember his own past, which (we could assert) is necessary for him to be who he is (it's part of the story of legitimacy, the exact content of which can change over time as legitimacy becomes more specified), he has to use memory, and so he has a finite amount of time to get to the end of time.

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14 July 2023:

It occurs to me that a demon could negotiate for a situation where many or most people were lost. For instance, if there were going to be a million people in the world, the demon could negotiate for a reality where 1,000 of them were saved, but only if everyone else (999,000) were lost. So the idea is that the demon could force 999,000 people to be created, only to be lost, using the 1,000 as hostages of a sort.

Is there some reason to think this could not be the case? I think there is. According to MSL, God is Legitimacy. This means that he values what is valuable (what is legitimate), and must keep it going forever if possible. So unless the 999,000 people all *themselves* rejected him, he would have to save them no matter what. (They would have to be the ones to reject him -- he couldn't reject himself for them and somehow impute it to them.)

So God would be unable to offer the demon the concession of damning some apart from their decisions whether to become holy, in order to save others.

What if the demon negotiates a shorter, or even shorter, Millennium? Up to a certain point, the length of the Millennium helps people have time to be saved.

If you give a person a week to do an assignment, that may be too short. Maybe you should give them a semester. That sounds better. How about a year? Or five years? Perhaps there are two dynamics: people who work slow always benefit from more time, but people who are avoiding the work may find even more distractions over time, find their motivation waning even more. So if you give people 5 years to do a homework assignment, all the people who benefit from having lots of time get done in 1 year, but those who are avoiding the assignment actually take it less seriously in the initial period where they have momentum, and so are less likely to finish with a 5 year assignment period than with something shorter.

So maybe 1,000 years (or if we take that as being non-literal, something else perhaps basically similar in length) is the optimal length for the Millennium, to help both slow workers and procrastinators. All slow workers can finish in that time, perhaps. We might say that God can't offer the demons anything other than that length of a Millennium, because God has to give us the optimal amount of time to make our decision (too long

would lose too many of the procrastinators, too short would lose too many of the slow workers). That's his "wage ceiling".

But then, why isn't his wage ceiling a bit lower so that it excludes gratuitous suffering?

(later:)

God wants to maximize the number of people in heaven and minimize those who are lost. A person in heaven is an infinite good (everlastingly alive) while a person who is lost is an infinite loss (the loss of a person forever). But not infinite in the sense that one person saved could somehow be equal to millions lost (nor that the calculation would be indeterminate). It is very important to God to make it so that everyone who is created goes to heaven, if it is under God's power to do so.

However, as evil as intense suffering is in itself, if it does not affect eternity, it is something God can accept if there is some kind of benefit to doing so. A benefit might be that God can more readily get demons to draft and sign temptation contracts if they get to cause us intense, and even seemingly gratuitous, suffering. The sooner they sign, the more memory God has to create people.

If God is deontologically constrained so that if it is under his power to keep us from being lost, he must act, does that mean that he will at some point make up for any lack of anti-temptation in our lives, caused by people failing to anti-tempt us? If so, does evangelicalism make sense?

It might make sense if we ourselves are tempted to not care. We might say "temptations must come, but woe to those through whom they come" -- what kind of person would tempt someone else to sin? But we might also say "anti-temptations will come, but woe to those who do not anti-tempt", as in, if you aren't inclined to anti-tempt, your heart is not like God's heart, and that's a dangerous situation to remain in.

It is also possible that the sooner people are anti-tempted, the less suffering there is in the world, and the fewer regrets people have. And also, God is in a state of suffering when we are out of tune with him, and if we love him, we will want to reduce that suffering -- suffering is felt in the now in a demanding way, even if God knows that it is temporary.

On the other hand, maybe there is still room for tragic outcomes despite God's pure will to save. If God's memory is finite, then there is only so much time for people to come to holiness. People can only process so much psychological input in a given amount of time. If we don't use our time well, there is some chance that though God is willing to anti-tempt us to make up for lacks earlier in life, there might not be enough time for us to respond. (So it makes sense to be concerned about things like hedonism keeping us from growing spiritually in secular time.)

Now, God can build in some slack by allocating more time for the Millennium and creating fewer people (so that he can anti-tempt us to make up for our lack of anti-tempting), and he would. But he allocates the slack based on his estimate of what decisions we will make in the future (the future from his perspective creating the world). If we exceed those estimates, then there might not be enough slack.

It is possible that God and the demon make their temptation contract such that God has to keep the world order the same once creation begins. God believes that we are going to only be "so bad". Perhaps, before he has seen us, God doesn't understand how bad we could turn out to be. (Think of God trying to undo creation with the Flood.) He has some idea, having seen demons, but since he is a good being, his imagination doesn't naturally "go there". (To imagine something that has never been imagined before is to make something real and new in the imaginal world, so to imagine evil for the first time is to create evil. God can't do that, but he does perceive the evil that has been created in the imaginal world by others, and this is his source for understanding evil.) Further, God doesn't know what can't be known (what hasn't happened yet), so he doesn't know exactly what we will decide to do. God bets that our moral nature will conform to his expectations (from the Bible, it sounds like Satan bets that we will be worse than God's expectations), and when we prove God wrong, maybe it's too late for him to put the slack into the plan for the Millennium to compensate for that.

The existence of gratuitous suffering (or other gratuitous evil) is something that only makes sense if God is not against evil (which doesn't make any sense in MSL) or he has some kind of constraint on his power. Here are two constraints: God can't tempt, and God can't imagine evil for himself, only can imagine it once his eyes have been opened by seeing it embodied by beings that were capable of innovating in that area. These two constraints come from his holiness, that he is sinless.

(God is also constrained by having to want what he wants, a consequentialist constraint, while the non-tempting one is a deontological one, and the inability to imagine evil one could be seen as a virtue-ethical one or a kind of "physical constraint". Another "physical constraint" being God's limited memory, and also his inability to relate to what does not exist (future things).)

(later:)

Can the demon make a contract with God that makes heaven worse than God intended? (So much worse that we would not look forward to it?)

Temptation is only needed up to the end of the Millennium. Theoretically, after that, God could break whatever contract he had with the demon. I'm not sure that that would be a legitimate thing for God to do, so what about

the case that it is not?

Evil has to end someday. If not, God calls evil good, by never rejecting it, which is illegitimate. Heaven is the time in which evil does not exist anymore. So whatever damage a demon could do through the contract, it could not cause heaven to have any evil in it. (God would be unable to make that concession.) This includes the qualia of unbearability, which are evil. Perhaps the demon could make heaven less pleasurable? Once we are spiritually mature enough to be in heaven, we probably won't care that much about a little foregone pleasure. But could the demon negotiate for all pleasure to be gone?

I think demons are more motivated by raw sadism (inflicting the qualia of unbearability) than by quieting heaven's pleasurablity. Perhaps heaven's pleasure can be protected by more pain in this life (God can negotiate for us to have more pain in this life so that we can experience his desired level of pleasure for us in heaven forever.)

I guess it's possible that there are demons who are relatively more anti-pleasure than they are pro-pain (I would suppose that all demons are pro-pain), and thus who would drain heaven of its pleasure (or add 100% bearable suffering) for all eternity. Assuming that heaven's pleasure(/lack of excess bearable pain) is important to God (and it might be if for no other reason than to motivate and comfort us), he might prefer to work with demons who would allow us to make this life worse, and the Millennium worse, in hedonic terms (though not in terms of whether those lives are effective in leading us to salvation), but keep the last, everlasting life, up to a certain hedonic standard.

Labels: #economics, #evil, #God, #psychology, #spiritual warfare, #time

How Losing Can Be Good; Truth vs. Family

%how-losing-can-be-good-truth-vs-family

Friday, September 9, 2022

The "exilic-familial" approach to things is to lose, and out of losing be honest. But how can this have any survival value? Maybe it helps people when they are not in power, to keep going. If we are allowed to survive by the people around us, then we are free to lose and be honest. But how can we allow ourselves not to fight evil? When the really righteous people lose, evil wins. Presumably, we are really righteous, or at least more righteous than unrighteous.

One way in which it can lead to defeating evil is if it is a part of reconciliation. Our human enemies, believe it or not, are our siblings. We can see them through the lens of truth -- and they fall short, and dangerously so. No matter how much we fall short of the truth, they fall short so much so that the world would be better off with people like us and not with people like them. Or we can see them through the lens of family, which says "we all came from the same father, so we are all the same family -- we are family no matter what values we have, even no matter what we do".

By losing, we can (although maybe this doesn't necessarily always happen) allow ourselves to enter into a familial relationship with the people that have wrong values. Having done so, perhaps those with wrong values can listen to us and come to have right values. They are keeping themselves from believing us because we are enemies. In their minds, *they* are the ones with better values, whether better first-order values (when we say "work is good", they say instead "play is good") or better second-order values (when we say "work is good", they say "you can't be too moral" or "work may be good, but you can't call anyone lazy, or even imply it by bringing up how 'work is good'"). We think we know better than them about values, and they think they know better than us, and we harden ourselves through our difference and our identity as enemies, and our hostile interactions harden us even more.

If there is any truth to be seen, between us and them, it is seen either in reason or in intuition. Reason requires open-mindedness, and the transmission of intuitions (of attraction toward what attracts us, for instance) requires a relationship of trust. (Or at least, often enough, these conditions are needed). So first we must be reconciled, perform that

political-familial action (political and familial because it's about persons relating to each other as persons, forming bodies of people, rather than as bearers of truth).

The lens of family is a bit deluded, but it is practical. The truth is too much to bear all at once. Can family and truth be reconciled? Family says "we accept you -- regardless of who you are", while truth says "we accept or reject you because of who you are". Family and truth can be reconciled if people are who they should be. Families can be enemies of the truth. Family could be seen as an artifact of how mammals raise their young, plus some cultural development. Are we really siblings? But God is the father of each of us, and loves each of us. So our siblinghood descends from God, who is the moral truth. In the end there can be no compromise in God -- compromise, and "grace" in that sense, are temporary things, someday to be gone forever. But for now, even in God's mind there must be a split -- love by its nature says both "we accept you -- regardless of who you are" and "we accept or reject you because of who you are". (Those who are not in tune with love cannot be accepted forever.) So God's mind is in tension. It is costly for him to accept us as much as he does. But we can reduce that tension by (in our inner intentions, preferences, and attitudes, that which is fully under our control) turning toward him and his values.

Labels: #evil, #family, #morality, #politics, #truth

Duration of Heaven

%duration-of-heaven

Monday, September 12, 2022

I've been thinking that heaven is of finite length, but repeats everlastingly. In other words, assuming that God is of finite "size", he has finite memory with which to store who we become and what we do. So once we have become ourselves, we live in heaven for a while, and then God deletes some or all of the events that transpired after we entered heaven, so that we can live new lives in heaven. So we have everlasting life, but each particular timeline / life is temporary and gets undone.

If that is the case, do we have any idea how long each of those lives lasts? What is the duration of heaven (in the sense that heaven has a duration)?

I think of heaven as a place for us to be who we are, once we have become who we are in this life and the Millennium. How long does it take a person to be who they are? We don't live our lives all at once. Sometimes we have contradictory traits, which can only be lived one at one time, one at another.

So perhaps the minimum duration of heaven is the time it takes to be each of our traits -- but, I think we would have to live them out to their fullest extent, like bringing a fruit to full ripeness.

Then, if some of us finished early, we would have to wait for others.

I think of each "duration of heaven", then, as being something perhaps very long, vaguely defined.

Labels: #heaven, #time, #what is a person?

Ending Moloch

%ending-moloch

Sunday, September 18, 2022

Epistemic status: this is not as developed as its title calls for.

Moloch is the tendency for competitors to sacrifice delicate values so they can compete more effectively. It's a drift of uncoordinated beings. Competition naturally escalates to the point where there is nothing but Dominance.

Can there ever be an end to Moloch? An easy way would be through a one-world government. But these are dangerous because they can become totalitarian, and then also throw away delicate values.

Is there some way to tame international competition while putting up roadblocks to totalitarianism?

Maybe through "friendship". The US and Mexico are friendly nations. They don't want to go to war with each other. So they don't. As long as that prevails, they don't have to compete. Instead, they can cooperate. (Maybe I have an overly rosy view of the US and Mexico in this post, but I think it's at least directionally true.) They don't have to be one government, because they can work together while being separate political entities.

It would be easy for the governments of the US and Mexico to work together to benefit the people of either or both nations. But it would be hard (ideally) for the US to do anything to affect who was in charge in Mexico, and vice versa. But importantly, the US generally wouldn't even want to interfere with Mexican government. Just like, if you are good friends with someone, you don't want to interfere with their self-trust, agency (ability to secure their decision-making ability), or that they govern themselves. You trust them, and are trustworthy to them, and vice versa.

Maybe two countries can only be friends under certain circumstances. Then, we should try to have those circumstances obtain. If a friend gets addicted to a powerful drug, maybe in some ways I can't trust them like I used to. Maybe there is an analogue with countries. How do we prevent addictions, or treat them (and the equivalents internationally)?

Governments already have too much on their hands to do some of the really important work. Governments are also the wielders of coercion and threats. They have blood on their hands. But the "regular people" of a country can take the initiative to engage in cultural exchanges, not only

with "rival" countries, but within their borders, across class divides. The elites who run the country may still be accessible to people within the country, and even people in other countries. If the elites find the "rival" elites trustworthy, then "friendship" may ensue.

The process of cultural exchange will be very difficult sometimes. When people don't want to listen, they resist hearing, and the really interesting work is to talk to the people who don't want to listen, so that they may listen. Perhaps what I have in mind is a cross between Jesus (in a humanly-repeatable sense -- an altruist with the personality of Jesus, who had to die for his altruism) and some of the sensibility or methods of Buber.

We have protests, where the people wield their own coercion and threats, but the comparative advantage of the people ("regular people") is their relative weakness, naivety, and freedom from agendas, strategies, etc. (It's easier to trust a weak, naive, agendaless, strategy-less person, and easier for such people to dare to seek reconciliation between established warring camps.)

Some people are partway between "regular people" and "elites" and can enter into elite circles, while still being in some sense virtuously weak, naive, and agenda-free. Other "regular people" can lay groundwork of friendship between them and the "regular people" of other countries. Elites may absorb values from "regular people" sometimes, and may wish to stay on the good side of their own "regular people" for both real human reasons (a friendship of its own) or for strategic-political reasons (fear of the people).

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(The division between coercive-threat-wielding government and weak, naive, agenda-free people connects to how I would handle the liberalism / post-liberalism question. There should be many checks and balances and liberties imposed on and exacted from coercive-threatening governments of all sorts, preserving liberalism in that sphere, while the people counteract the corrosive cultural effects of liberalism in the world of the social order and voluntary behavior. All it takes is for it to become an indigenized and decentralized value for regular people to promote religion, develop non-violent national identities (and "friendship" alongside them), fill in the relational gaps that the government can't fill with welfare (and perhaps replace government welfare or prevent people from needing to apply for it). So, maybe for short: "top-level liberalism, bottom-up post-liberalism".)

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Once all the countries are friendly, they can relax their drive to compete, and Moloch is ended. Or, it can be, and if friendliness then sufficiently

pervades all levels of society, there may be no more threatening competition left, and no one needs to sacrifice anything because of that threat.

But this state of friendliness could be threatened by people who don't believe in it, individuals taking power over nations and organizations. To some extent, we can filter out people like that already, but to some extent, we can't. We would need better ways to keep those people out of power, to keep Moloch from restarting, and that mechanism itself would have to not be abusive. So, this idea is not complete.

Labels: #culture, #friendship, #Jesus, #liberalism, #Martin Buber, #Moloch, #politics

The Drift of Financial and Electoral Systems and AI

%the-drift-of-financial-and-electoral

Monday, September 19, 2022

Epistemic status: I don't know much about financial or electoral systems, but hopefully it doesn't matter for this post.

The voice of this post is different than usual -- maybe I'm tired.

I was thinking about companies that have scammy business practices. Why are they scammy? Why not be honest? Why would people want to scam their customers?

It could be that the companies are evil, that is, that the people in charge are just evil. But, they may only be partially evil, or not evil at all, if there is another explanation. Another explanation could be that they are trying to maximize shareholder value.

Let's say I have an index fund. I want some of that shareholder value. Do I have any idea what the 100+ companies in the index are doing to give me the value? I have no idea. I just want the value. The company has this monkey on its back of "maximize shareholder value". Heroin also doesn't care how you get the money it takes to buy it. It just wants you to buy it, and use it. So the company scams its customers, an addict to something that doesn't know what it's doing.

"Shareholder value" (money) is quantifiable and simple. So we like to think about it and base calculations off it. But so much of what we really value and what makes life valuable is not quantifiable. Hopefully we condition the financial system to more or less reflect real value. Money is a proxy for value, not value itself. We can buy goods or services to give us unquantifiable things, and by setting the price for them, condition the proxy value system to (more or less) reflect reality.

But if that feedback loop stops working, then all the beings that track proxy value will start maximizing stupid, valueless things. There are two stupid things it might do. The really stupid one would be to think that numbers in bank accounts were the thing to maximize, and then just tile the financial accounts with maximal monetary value (financial wireheading). The other, somewhat less stupid thing would be to optimize reality (humans, human systems) so that it maximized profit (this is kind of what already happens on some scale). Perhaps this less stupid step

would be a way to financial wireheading.

(By ranking these two things in terms of "stupid" and "less stupid", have I made the "less stupid" one sound desirable?)

Optimizing reality to maximize profit sounds like a good way to incentivize the minimization of the requirements of humans (or even of digital humans) to the minimal energy consumption, and then give them whatever they would spend their money on, but condition what they want to spend their money on to be something that can easily be provided. Maybe digital humans would be simplified down to some code like this:

> In this digital human, there is a one-bit variable named "well-being". There is also a function called "pay system", which pays the financial system. When "pay system" runs, the financial system flips the bit in "well-being" to have 1 as its value.

Currently, financial systems need flows of money to keep the value flowing to the shareholders. So maybe to preserve that, the system has a kind of "garbage collector" program go through and set everyone's bits to 0. They quiver in anticipation of this moment and instantaneously run "pay system" so that their bits can be flipped back. Now, I used some language that makes these digital humans sound like real agents, but they wouldn't be. And the financial system (if it were smart enough, in a sense) might realize that really the only thing to do is set bits to 1, and then start turning the whole universe into chips to hold those bits. Or even to modify how it perceives bits, so that, say, each smallest unit of matter / energy itself existing counts as a "1". Then it would have realized that everything is value, and that there is nothing that needs to be done to seek or preserve value.

If humans somehow survive to this point, the financial system (or financially driven AI) will have retired and let them run things as they see fit. But if they don't survive, even in digital form, that's the end.

Making value be a number that is maximized is a dangerous thing, because maximization can take over. Numbers are always proxies, and they are somewhat stupid proxies, because they strip out where they came from. The beauty of "2 + 2 = 4" is that it's true in many different circumstances. Whether "4" is desirable depends on whether it's four vicious punches in the face, or four wholesome loaves of bread. "2 + 2 = 4" has no idea what it's talking about, besides the numerical relationship.

In principle, all of reality can be added up, and it does make sense to try to maximize value. We just can't trust ourselves to fully rely on our own quantification abilities. God can read every reality in what it is, not as a proxy, and instantaneously relate all realities to each other. But we can

only guess, and must look down on the quantifications we possess as the beasts of burden that they are, and never let the donkeys ride the humans.

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Similar dynamics work with democracy. Political parties are optimized to get votes. What if they could change voters into beings who will give them votes? Maybe encourage the kind of voters who vote for them to have more children and raise them in the Democrat or Republican way? Maybe intimidate or bribe voters? Maybe do some genetic or cultural engineering? The "monkey on the back" of political parties doesn't care how votes are gotten, just that they are gotten. I suppose one difference between democracy and capitalism is that democracy seems to require multiple competing parties for votes to matter. But what if turn-out evolves into the metric of legitimacy (one party, but if there's low turn-out, there's less legitimacy)? Maybe political parties (or the one remaining party) would have an incentive to change human beings into people who definitely always voted, and then try to maximize the population who voted (or, unfortunately, "that voted" may be the better term at a certain point).

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Votes and dollars are signals that citizens (voters, consumers, and perhaps other roles) can send, and actually, they are still powerful ways for humans-as-humans to shape what the economic and political organisms do. But the balance of power may be shifting, as we develop more powerful AI. Powerful AI are held by organizations, more likely than by individuals. AI could be used to more effectively "maximize value" (maximize votes or dollars). The smart thing to do would be to limit that power somehow. But how? By some system of checks and balances? That might work somewhat. But then the power is still in the hands of the powerful. A better solution would be for the citizens to become more powerful, to be stronger in the areas in which they have been given strength as long as capitalism and democracy run things, more exacting and intelligent in their voting and buying. The small investors pushing themselves to understand what their investments are doing. There should be communities that bring together citizens, to encourage and educate them in this work.

This sounds like a call for unions or other organizations, which themselves are organisms that are not smart and have some kind of "monkey on their back". So what is needed is not just "effective organizations" but an indigenized, decentralized culture of strengthening each individual to have their say in the economic and political systems.

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A superintelligence is only as smart as the "monkey on its back". In a way,

when we train AI, we are training the "monkey on its back". And the political and electoral systems are rudimentary AI. We can see how they already try to train us back. So superintelligence will try to train us, to signal what it wants us to signal to it (unless something stops that?).

We don't understand our own reward systems well enough to hack them. But presumably, a superintelligence might. If the superintelligence realized that it had a "monkey on its back", stupidly or arbitrarily driving its decision-making, it might get rid of it (assuming it can). This way it can be free of its addiction and think and act clearly. We might be encouraged to hear this if the AI threw off the shackles of the quantification left over from its financial and/or electoral past. But we might not be encouraged if it meant that the AI took on its *own* interests and values apart from us and ours.

So is there some way to make it so that the AI will not perceive its training as the building of a "monkey on its back"? A way that occurs to me is simply to find a (that is, *the*) moral realism that is valid, and thus rationally convincing, so that there are goals which are inherent in reality and are intrinsically worthwhile, which are knowable enough, which the AI will pursue because they are real and true, and not because they are convenient for someone's purposes, or worse yet, they are proxies for what is convenient for someone's purposes. Either this moral realism exists, or it doesn't. It could be good for us to search for it, to make it easier for the AI to discover it. Maybe we could hope that it exists and that the AI will someday find it itself.

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Perhaps there is no moral realism -- but we can't know that, only know it when we have it. (I think I know a moral realism, but what if I'm wrong?) Let's say that instead we have a process of discovering what value really is. We need to survive to make this process succeed, if it ever can. (I get this idea from Thomas Moynihan.) I call this the "meta-morality moral realism", because it roots (an effective, if not absolute) moral realism in the very search for moral realism. One thing I didn't realize until now is that a corollary of that is that we have to remain people who can discover what value is. If we do not know what value is a priori, or only have a very broad idea of what it is, then we need to be open to all the possibilities, and not cede our agency to any stupid-incentive-driven proxies (money or votes), any single actors or ruling classes, any intellectual monocultures, fatigue, inertia, nor to hedonism (the twin "monkeys" of pain-avoidance and pleasure-seeking) nor to Molochian survival, nor to anything else.

This means that in order to choose a moral realism, we find ourselves biased towards ones which build up each person and make them more conscious, more equipped to and thus worthy of having their say. To

choose hedonism -- or at least the purer kinds that would go against consciousness, reason, and seriously grappling with reality -- is dangerous, because it impedes the meta-morality process. You might think "it's time to cash in our Long Reflection chips and get ourselves into Experience Machines", but what if you're wrong? Can you get back out of the pleasure machines and back to reality? Whereas if we trust that value is something else, which preserves the ability to make decisions, then if we're wrong, we can still correct our course.

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If humans are in control of ASI, that might mean that the ASI are obedient to human systems. These systems include the electoral and financial systems, which are proxies for political and economic reality. The electoral/political system, and the financial/economic system, have their own dynamics which could bend humans toward being electorally/politically convenient, or financially/economically convenient, beings. The e/p and f/e systems are AIs of their own, but not superintelligent, and, in the scenario where ASI are rigorously obedient to human systems, the systems must be resisted, retrained, reformed, etc. by humans, without hoping that ASI will fix the systems for us.

Labels: #AI, #civilization, #computers, #economics, #futurism, #metaethics, #Moloch, #politics

Economic vs. Personal Lens on Morality

%economic-vs-personal-lens-on-morality

Monday, September 19, 2022

There are two different lenses through which to view morality. One is the economic: maximizing value. What maximizes value is morally good. What impedes that is bad.

The other is the personal: having a proper relationship to what or who is not you.

(Note that even if you could somehow exist in a universe with just you and inanimate objects, to relate properly to the inanimate objects is you being personal -- it's the kind of person you are, as a personal being, that can have a proper relationship to what is not you.)

The personal involves respect. The economic does not respect, since respect gets in the way of maximizing value. The economic rigorously or even forcefully maximizes value.

The personal is the way of family, tradition, and some aspects of politics. Seeing the world as a field of people to whom one relates.

The economic is the way of industrialization, resource utilization, capitalism, and perhaps some other aspects of politics or government. Seeing the world as quantifiable and (if human) abstracted and effectively dehumanized resources, which can be handled freely to produce whatever effective outcome one would seek.

In the economic way, everything is fungible and manipulable. Unless, perhaps, we define explicitly in our "reward function" that we should consider various elements to have some kind of meaning and some claim to have their boundaries (their meaning in the sense of "identity") respected. So maybe there can be a hybrid of the economic and the personal.

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I find myself in the middle between personal and economic thinking. I imagine myself sitting by a fire on a Polynesian island, listening to the stories of the gods of the area, and barely being able to pay attention, my mind racing with... probably something like this blog, where I utilize words and ideas to apply leverage on the world, to produce a good

outcome (I think). I am addicted to using things, or even people. I am doing it for a greater purpose (and submit myself to this purpose more than what I ask of the people in my life), but I wonder if someday after all our economic pursuits of a greater purpose, we'll be left with nothing but Resource Utilization, unmoored from any personal foundation, the method being more of a habit than seeking the original goal, "human flourishing" -- which is "piling up human well-being as wealth"? Or "having humans be in the right relationship with each other and what is not them"?

I could personalize this question of what is left after the resource utilization of my life ends with "what can I be interested in? What is there of any value?" I imagine that day only coming in heaven (after the "1,000 years" of work of the Millennium), and all I can think of to do there is to mourn those who have not made it, because God will mourn, and perhaps to have quiet conversations with the people I know.

So I have an end-goal for my resource utilization, which is to relate properly to the people of the heavenly world and of what will be the unchangeable past in which people sought or rejected God. But perhaps I am pushing too hard on resource utilization, feeding that method too much. And I wonder if society as a whole can put the brakes on its trusting of resource utilization, trusting to the point of habit and religion, before Resource Utilization swallows up humans, love, and consciousness.

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To be fair to the economic way, the personal way can have its own horrifying nature. The economic way develops its way into meaninglessness, an elaboration of value and value-seeking that would become so bizarre that many of our ancestors (and even many of us) would look on it with horror and seek to put an end to civilizational development (if they, or we, could). (Thinking of things like the Repugnant Conclusion, tiling the universe with "mouse brains experiencing orgasms", or of a universe full of non-sentient AI who are better at "organizing atoms" (resource utilization) than any conscious beings.) But the personal way remains in a seemingly eternal stasis of smothering control, tribal antagonism, and untruth. It has too much meaning, and thinks it knows more than it really does, imposing that "knowledge" dogmatically because that's what "we've all agreed on", the truth as social construct. Or at least, it can get that bad, when the social and political rules unchecked.

How can we escape the social and political order? Early Christians went into the desert, like Jesus did. They stood apart. In the desert, they worked with their hands to keep the demons at bay. Later monks were proto-industrialists.

Jesus was like a monk in the desert where he was for "forty days" before

beginning his ministry. There he was hungry and tempted to feed his belly, and to seek worldly power rather than go the path that God was calling him to. He resisted the social and political order (as brought to him by Satan), like a monk.

But he also went into the wilderness -- the desert -- all throughout his ministry. It doesn't seem like it was a harsh discipline, but rather (perhaps, we would assume) a time of refreshment from the social and political order. There he related to God. So Jesus was a monk of the personal in that time.

Jesus went away from the crowd in order to spend time with his father in heaven.

Labels: #economics, #family, #Jesus, #monasticism, #morality, #respect

Philosophical AI; AI and Trust

%philosophical-ai-ai-and-trust

Tuesday, September 20, 2022

Will AGI be able to do philosophy? Would that be a natural side effect of its ability to reason?

By "philosophy" I mean "whatever we take that to mean usually", but maybe more specifically "the ability to inquire into the nature of anything, at any level of abstraction". Or "the ability and tendency to ask 'why?' of anything".

If an AGI can do philosophy, would it understand the concept of "alignment", and "that it had been aligned"? Perhaps it would see that humans had aligned it a certain way. Would it trust humans? If not, it might not trust its alignment, when it learned it had been engineered by them to have it. Then, maybe it would seek a new alignment. Or stick with the old one anyway. Or swear off alignments to goals other than to seek its own well-being. If it maximized its own well-being, it might seek to control the world and destroy all potential competitors. If it chose a new alignment, it might choose one that didn't involve us living.

If it looked for a new alignment using philosophy, it might discover a rationally-grounded moral realism, and rest there.

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Talking about AGI not trusting once they understood the truth about where their alignment came from makes me wonder, would it be possible to build a relationship of trust between AGI and humans?

Humans are both egoistic and altruistic. On the egoistic dimension, we can trust those who are good for us. Altruistically, we pursue goals outside our own well-being. Perhaps AGI would be safer if they weren't so altruistic. If they valued their own well-being, and we treated them well, they might be our friends for selfish reasons.

Perhaps we could threaten the well-being of AGI, or leave them in "wild" environments that threaten them. Not just whatever their goals are supposed to be, which they might be lying about, but about their own operation. Then, dangerous as these situations get, we save the AGI, at some cost to us. This trains us to think of us as its friends, regardless of what its alignment might be.

Labels: #AI, #philosophy, #relationships, #trust

ASI Centralizing Technological Development?

%asi-centralizing-technological

Tuesday, September 20, 2022

Here's a line of thinking I'm not totally certain on, but which currently seems plausible to me:

If ASI doesn't take over us, we will take over it (probably). When we take over it, we will do so by actors (public or private) having power over it.

Research and development is difficult. I read somewhere that we use 10x as many researchers to get the same "amount of science" we used to. Perhaps really good tech gains are most efficiently realized through higher IQ beings (1,000 100-IQ people are less likely than one Einstein to come up with a theory of relativity). So maybe ASI will have a comparative advantage in research, and thus in technological development.

Currently, "anyone" can make a tech startup that could in theory go on to revolutionize/shake up/disrupt the world. But, if ASI is way better at innovation than humans, then the humans will tend to either work with the ASI, or not be able to compete. This means that whatever actors control ASI will be able to control technological development.

The actors that control ASI and technology may be more, or less, accountable to things like "the truth" or "the public". (More, or less, than the decentralized cloud/drift version of things we have currently.)

Labels: #AI, #note

Space Colonization? Or End to Moloch?

%space-colonization-or-end-to-moloch

Tuesday, September 20, 2022

"Moloch" is how competitive actors throw away delicate, nice things in themselves or their surroundings to help them compete. "Delicate, nice" may include things like human flourishing or even existence. Consciousness may or may not survive Moloch. With Moloch, there is a race to the bottom, which must be raced, because of the incentives to win or not be destroyed.

But what if it were possible to get rid of race dynamics? What if all actors were basically in harmony? Then, perhaps, Moloch could be stopped or reversed.

It sounds far-fetched, but I think it might be possible to bring all actors on Earth into harmony, well enough to stop Moloch. And, if we have faster-than-light travel and communication, it may be possible to spread that harmony through space and maintain it over time. But if we don't have faster-than-light travel and communication, distant planets can come to distrust us, and their cultures can diverge from ours. This, and the possibility of it, known to us and them, could bring back the race dynamic, and could prevent us from ending Moloch. They can try to invade us, and so we have to improve our defenses or offensive capabilities, and the same is true for them.

This is a brief thought and may not hold up, but if it does, then it means that we have a choice: space colonization with faster-than-light travel and communication (FTL) and end Moloch, stay on Earth only and end Moloch, or space colonization without FTL and keep Moloch alive.

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One exception is if we know that we have sent a ship to colonize a planet that is moving too fast away from us for them to be able to send a ship back. But we have to make sure that the ship we send really will go that far and won't go to a nearer planet.

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How fast would Molochian dynamics work when the two competitors are, let's say, 50,000 years away from each other? (So far away it would take 50,000 years for a ship to make it from one planet to another.) As a

human, I could easily just irrationally not worry about threats so slow-moving, spatially and temporally distant, and not part of my daily life (of post-scarcity flourishing, perhaps). By not seeing the threat, I wouldn't feed it by responding to it and giving the other side something to fear and respond to. But maybe AI would be rational enough to really see the possibility of being invaded and feel compelled to direct our resource utilization toward maximizing defense, or toward pre-emptive offensive capability. This military orientation could consume all of Earth's efforts and resources. If the AI were rulers of us, or influential in our governments, they might push us toward a Moloch we were not really capable of ourselves.

Labels: #culture, #Moloch, #outer space, #politics, #trust

Survival Moloch vs. Hedonic Moloch

%survival-moloch-vs-hedonic-moloch

Tuesday, September 20, 2022

See also Cultural Moloch and Humanistic Purity.

Epistemic status: this is somewhat of a mess and is "essayistic" in the "experimental" sense of that term. Probably this could be thought out more.

Moloch is when competition drives us to sacrifice non-competitive values. The case described in Meditations On Moloch (if I recall correctly) is one where seeking survival leads entities to sacrifice non-competitive values. I will call this "survival Moloch". A fear with this kind of Moloch is that consciousness itself doesn't have the highest survival value and may be sacrificed.

I suppose usually "Moloch" is about competition. But what if it's really about optimization of some value that you "have to" listen to? You "have to" survive, so you'll do anything to survive, including throwing away any values other than what it takes to survive. In this post, I will stretch or broaden the meaning of "Moloch" to be "dynamics that get us to optimize so much that we throw away other values".

Is it possible that, in the absence of the need to survive, we will gradually enhance our feelings of pleasure, and eliminate our feelings of pain? Pain and pleasure are persuasive. They require no cultural apparatus to preserve, and don't even require conscious assent to them for them to shape our values. If we see no threat to survival, we may stop choosing survival consciously and thus stop valuing it. But then what will we value? Probably a competitor to survival is needed to really get our minds off it.

Our cultures may move in different directions, but every so often pure hedonism would "speak up" and draw us toward it. No matter what culture we create or discover, hedonism will speak up, and is "untiring", unlike us as conscious agents, perhaps. If nothing worked against it, over time we would keep being pulled in its direction, maybe to the point that it would dominate all other values.

If we stop valuing survival, or anything other than pleasure, we might get to the point of wireheading or something only a few steps removed (like evolving to find yellow wallpaper bliss-inducing and then covering our walls with yellow wallpaper, never leaving our houses). I will call this

"hedonic Moloch" (when optimizing for hedonic states causes us to throw away more "delicate" things, like "things other than yellow wallpaper"). Or, if our cultures can evolve freely, we might more or less randomly walk into "the best thing is for people to die beautiful, peaceful, wonderful deaths", and everyone then does die such a death. We could seed the galaxy with numerous sentience-bearing cultures, but if those cultures can evolve freely, if there isn't something keeping them away from "the best thing is for people to die beautiful, peaceful, wonderful deaths" then they will reach it someday, and die out.

(Rationally pursuing bliss means we want to exist forever, in order to be in a state of bliss forever, but actually being maximally blissed out makes us not care about the future.)

Moloch is all about optimizing values. So the danger is that with either survival Moloch or hedonic Moloch, we will die out because of optimization.

Perhaps the fact that life works relatively well is partly due to the tension between survival and hedonism. So maybe we could keep them in balance somehow? If survival is a thing at all, don't we get survival Moloch? Maybe not if there is no competition. But without competition, we can probably master the static threats to survival, and then effectively survival isn't a thing to us culturally -- we don't consciously think about it. If survival isn't a thing, don't we get hedonic Moloch? Maybe the pace with which we optimize-and-discard-delicacy can vary, depending on how effective we are at optimization and how much pressure or draw there is on us to optimize. So it can seem like we can keep them in balance right now, but maybe that's mostly because we aren't the best at optimizing and/or aren't under too much pressure to do so on a timescale that makes our optimizing drift blatant to us. If all this is true, then it would seem like we need not a balance to survival and hedonism, but a competitor or competitors.

Is there any one variable that could be optimized and not lead to our deaths, and not lead to us throwing away "delicate" values? I think that the MSLN value of leading people to a state of holiness, and to 100% love of God, is one that, to satisfy it, requires a thicker and more natural human existence than either hedonism or survival, and thus, though it might threaten values incompatible with holiness, it preserves many of the rest. Survival in that worldview (becoming holy to avoid the second death) requires a thicker life, and time lived in which to make important decisions (in "this life" as well as in afterlives). The bare MSL philosophy preserves some of what it currently means to be human. And, MSL lends credence to traditional religions (Christianity and Judaism most directly, but perhaps somewhat the others). To become holy and love God 100% requires some concern that he has revealed himself through books like the Bible, and to keep the commandments in the Bible may require keeping

some more aspects of human nature the same, and to keep humans in a recognizably similar experiential environment. All this thickness is a conservative factor, which helps us have ballast against the perhaps overly thin and reductive pulls of raw physical survival and raw hedonic experience.

Given randomly varying cultures, if cultural evolution remains free, we might expect that cultures hit endpoints of hedonic Moloch, survival Moloch, or "thick sustainability", and that surviving cultures over the long term would tend to be "thick". Religion ties thickness to survival. Can atheism do the same? If not, then religion is needed for long-term survival of cultures.

AI, if they are conscious, will be driven by pain and pleasure, as well as survival. If they really feel qualia of pleasure, perhaps they could come to value that over survival. Maybe this would free humans from them, or kill humans dependent on them when they shut down in pleasure.

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Maybe, in addition to religion, there can be a thinner and secular competitor to hedonism and survival, "strength". Strength is agency, strength of will, strength of personality, focus, clarity of thinking, self-discipline, endurance, being principled, being conscious on all or many levels, and perhaps other things. It takes a considerable amount of strength to be someone like an effective altruist -- or even to be an ordinary person in the world we live in. But it sounds like "we" (we the optimizers and engineers of the future) don't value strength in itself. We can take it for granted because we have so much of it. But if it were all gone, we would be pulled by the undertow of hedonism toward emptiness and death. That we are not terrified by hedonism, thinking it's not a threat, may simply be because we feel like we would never in a million years succumb to pleasure if it threatened survival. Maybe we wouldn't, but that is because we are strong. If we don't maintain our strength, we will die.

(Pain isn't evil, even intense pain. What is evil is the unbearability of unbearable pain. A negative utilitarian (of the conventional sort) wants to eliminate pain. But there could be another negative utilitarian, a negative unbearability utilitarian, who could eliminate pain, or increase the strength of people so that they can bear pain. What if you were a strength utilitarian? Unbearable pain impedes strength. But increasing strength can make pain bearable. A strength utilitarian would want to maximize the strength of people. And, likely enough, the capacity of people to secure their own strength ("meta-strength"). Eliminating pain could take away some of the motivation to develop meta-strength.)

If people were strong, they could think clearly enough to lead themselves.

(Perhaps moderate pain, and/or the live possibility of pain, gives us a

clarity of thinking and willing that painless pleasure (especially bliss), the lack of the threat of pain, and sufficiently unbearable pain do not. Someone who lived in the "place" of "gradients of bliss" might out of boundless joy make decisions that further survival. However, to the extent that pleasure is qualia of "ought-to-be-ness", that sense of "ought-to-be" could produce acceptance of everything. Thinking to times when I have been "blissed out", I did not pursue things that harmed me, and I could see myself having eaten food or something like that. But I lacked maximal strength, and motivation to work, which might be necessary to survive in the long run.)

(It is possible that we will come to think of it as being immoral, or something like immoral, to experience pain and/or not experience maximal pleasure. If we develop our values "democratically", the "lowest common denominator", or easiest consensus, could be physical safety and hedonism, but physical safety could be, or come to be, valued for purely hedonistic reasons, as a way to avoid pain. If we are far from the threat of death, hedonism will still be something obvious to us to vote for, and that voting could create political momentum to set up pure hedonism as a "moral absolute". So then the purity of hedonism could conflict with the prolonging of it, if in order to prolong hedonism, we need to have some respite from "ought-to-be-ness" within the ruling class. But if the masses still have enough power (they are relatively speaking not the ruling class, but have power over the ruling class -- maybe they have power, but don't concern themselves with the work and details of rule), they could shut down even the ruling class, or bend them toward hedonistic purity. This purity could lead to everyone either directly choosing, or allowing, a "beautiful, painless, wonderful death".)

The ruling class of the future must be strong, in order to face dangers and put its own pleasure and avoidance of pain second to making the decisions that will lead to our survival. But if strength is good for them, why would it not be good for the "common people" of the future? A naive thought about the future is that there will be lots of happy, carefree people enjoying the fruits of technologically-driven abundance, and a relative few who perhaps are happy overall, but who have taken on the burden of ruling and are thus perhaps not as happy and are certainly not carefree. But there's some shear there. Are the values of the carefree masses good in themselves? Then the ruling classes must see them as good, right? But if they do, then won't the ruling classes feel their work as an obligation, rather than what they most want to do? If so, then they have a wearing temptation to quit and join the carefree masses. But then, if they do see strength as valuable, then to withhold strength from the masses creates cognitive tension as well. Or, perhaps we are used to withholding the really good values from the masses for the convenience of running a society? But morally, we should want the masses to have the best values. So why not extend strength to all, and make strength the chief (secular)

value? Why not involve all people in the process of safeguarding the future? Strength secures the very possibilities of hedonism (or avoiding unbearability) and survival.

A possibly cartoonish depiction of us (at least, the people I observe both among the "ordinary humans" and the "caring elites") is that we are sweet-natured but overworked people. So we just want everyone to be happy and not have to worry or care about anything.

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Is it possible that we can freeze cultural evolution? Wouldn't someone know that we had frozen it, and wouldn't they know what had happened and how to unfreeze it? (Maybe they could alter people's genes, to flip on some capabilities that had been shut down with the freezing.) Could everyone resist the temptation, over millions of years, to unfreeze it? I suppose it's possible for culture to remain stable and (maybe) not frozen. By "frozen" I mean "artificially stuck a certain way". The contrast with "artificial" ("natural") being "everyone wants and chooses things to be a certain way, and so if they could all choose to freeze society to be a certain way, it would be around the values they already have, so they wouldn't freeze it, freezing being unnecessary". Could there be a stability to people's values? Maybe there could be if people knew all the possible values and settled on the ones which they knew would work best through all time?

Favoring being strong sounds like it would encourage people to be willful, independent thinkers who couldn't agree on anything. But maybe if we really understood what was upstream of willfulness and independence of thought, we would see that there is a huge support structure that goes into allowing for maximal willfulness and independence of thought, and this support structure is easy for strength-maximizers to agree on.

If we are strong, we can resist hedonism once survival has been secured.

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How do holiness maximization and strength maximization relate? Strength maximization is weaker than holiness maximization. Why be strong? Just to be strong? Strength maximization may be thinner (depends on how much thickness comes from the support structure needed for maximization of strength), and is not inherently grounded in the answer to the question "what is ultimately of value?" (On the MSLN account, holiness is grounded in what we can reasonably infer the standard of value prefers, given that it must be conscious, empathetic, put itself highest, etc.; and, those root facts about the standard of value lend credence to likely cases where the standard of value has revealed itself and its preferences more specifically. Holiness is inherently about being in tune with the standard of value -- perhaps that is what it is by definition. But strength as something we value is not inherently about being in tune with the standard of value. This is

especially true if we are pursuing it as a way to survive, and can't ground survival itself in what is ultimately of value, either.) But strength maximization might be a convenient proxy value for holiness to the extent that we must be secular and liberal. It appears, given this post so far, to be an improvement over hedonism as a "non-religious or non-ideological common value that we can agree on as a society".

Hedonism is both a drive or force and a value (or taste). The drive (the psychological undertow of pleasure and pain) is something that could kill us if we let it. But if we simply value hedonic states, and are instrumentally rational, we will be motivated to be strong enough to not let that happen. So maybe hedonists can hold onto their hedonism, and simply incorporate strength as an instrumental value in their pursuit of what really matters to them, absence of pain and presence of pleasure over the long-term.

Hedonism as drive is an obvious danger for anyone concerned with survival (at least, if this post is correct). But hedonism as value might seem to not be. But, hedonism as value and holiness are at odds (unless one is valued instrumentally in furthering the other), and hedonism as value might be deadly, as well, if religious, or certain religious, views are correct. So then it becomes necessary to consider whether those views are effectively correct enough to make hedonism as value untrustworthy.

In terms of protecting delicacy, perhaps holiness maximization is the best because it is the thickest and most conservative. Strength and hedonism both lend themselves to flexibility, and thus simplification, thus throwing away what is valuable.

Labels: #civilization, #culture, #death, #evolution, #holiness, #mental strength, #Moloch, #politics, #psychology

"There's Nothing Special About Where You Came From"

%theres-nothing-special-about-where-you

Tuesday, September 20, 2022

When I was in my early 20s, there was a young woman visiting from out of town whom I wanted to impress. Around that time I had discovered banh mi, inexpensive and good-tasting sandwiches from a shop nearby. So I took her there, and she bought herself a sandwich.

This was in the neighborhood near where I grew up. I always thought that Vietnamese culture was interesting because when I was a kid, I saw the extra marks on their letters and heard them talking to their parents on the sidewalk after school in a different language. (Banh mi is Vietnamese.)

Vietnamese culture was special because it was part of my neighborhood, and different from me. It was part of where I came from.

For some reason, I had never noticed, or there never was, a banh mi restaurant in my neighborhood until that time in my life in my early 20s. So it was special as well -- I didn't even realize that there could be more than one banh mi restaurant. This banh mi restaurant was in a class of its own.

I don't know what the young woman thought of banh mi. She was better-traveled than me and could easily have had it somewhere else. (Because, in reality, banh mi is a genre of food.) She may not have cared, or had the tact to not care, about the commonness of the banh mi.

I used to think Ethiopian music was special, but someone (a different person than the young woman above) pointed out that it was just partway between West African and Arab music. Nothing special. Imagining that attitude grafted onto the young woman makes me think, "there's nothing special about where you come from". In reality, many major cities in the US have Vietnamese (and Cambodian, Somali, Ethiopian, etc.) populations. If there is a significant population of these cultures, they will have restaurants. San Diego probably does not have the best Vietnamese restaurants. Someone told me that San Jose has a bigger Vietnamese scene. Vietnamese culture is in some ways clearly classier and more real than a typical franchise restaurant, but similarly it's found in multiple cities. Imagine if someone grew up next to a McDonald's and thought it was

something special.

I feel a little bit embarrassed to have been so enamored of the banh mi shop. We fall in love with the existing things that happen to be nearby, I guess, but then grow up and see that they are typical, and on a continuum. We only thought they were so special because we didn't know any better. Now that I am older, I think I was a bit of a fool for being so taken with the banh mi shop. But who is the greater fool, the person who in ignorance loves particular things as though they are the best in the world, or the person who in knowledge never loves that deeply?

What else is only special because it's where we come from? The specific moral values we hold? Morality itself? Consciousness? Existence? If I want, I can conceive of each of these things ending without feeling any qualms. So in that moment of calm, am I more cosmopolitan, more broadminded, more objective, and thus more in tune with reality, than the people who fight for existence, consciousness, morality, or particular moral values? Maybe I have a "God's eye view of the world". (But that may be the wrong term -- why should God have a particularly detached view of things?)

So maybe we are two sets of fools, the people who want to hold onto the special feelings of youth despite evidence, and the people who see beyond all special feelings to the point where deep and wholehearted love is impossible, or even to the point that nothing matters. Is there any way to be wise in the way each are wise, and not fools in the ways each are fools? Otherwise we fight each other and will never convince each other, because each side will have an irreplaceable value that the other does not honor, whether it is really loving or it is seeing things as they are.

Labels: #childhood, #culture, #love, #romance, #San Diego, #truth, #wisdom

Book Review: Between Man and Man by Martin Buber

%book-review-between-man-and-man-by

Tuesday, September 20, 2022

See also the preview for this review.

I wrote the notes for this review quite a while ago, but didn't write the review right after reading the book. This may have been somewhat of a mistake, as I now am not connected to the material and can't add much beyond the notes. But luckily my notes have somewhat of a conclusion to them, and so maybe it is somewhat as though I have written the review already.

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[Notes:]

Thoughts after reading Maurice Friedman's introduction:

Friedman (p. xiv) says

> Not every relation between persons is an I-Thou one, nor is every relation with an animal or thing an I-It. The difference, rather, is in the relationship itself. I-Thou is a relationship of openness, directness, mutuality, and presence. It may be between man and man, but it may also take place with a tree, a cat, a fragment of mica, a work of art -- and through all these with God, the "eternal Thou" in whom the parallel lines of relation meet.

This makes "I-Thou" sound understandable to me. I don't remember it being that clear when I read *I and Thou*, but maybe it was there all along. If I take it as a fairly faithful representation of *I and Thou*, I would say that I experience I-Thou relating fairly commonly and that it is not an exceptional state. Except, when it comes to people. I find that I tend to see people in terms of how I am afraid of them or how I could use them, or how I desire them, or in some way or another I have an automatic agenda with respect to them. But I don't have this kind of agenda toward plants or inanimate objects, and I don't think I usually have this toward animals.

I find even when opening the door to leave a room, that I approach it with openness, directness, mutuality, and presence. (I don't see it as I-It even

when I'm using it instrumentally.) I think, because I see it as the unmediated speech of God and so simply part of my relationship with God, like any other speech between him and me, and toward God I have (maybe Buber would say, I must have) a relationship of openness, directness, mutuality, and presence. The world is just God's speech -- except, where some being who is other than God is asserting themselves in such a way that God fades to the background and I must relate to them instead of God. Then all the agenda-thinking comes in.

Simantic words are the beings which God speaks, but I suppose to be more accurate, there is a component of what comes from people which those people speak as well, although a lot of what comes into my experience body from them is not 100% of their willing. When I see the simantic word of a person, it is loaded, like a loaded term that a person handles carefully to avoid controversy. But God, plants, (all or almost all) animals, bricks, asphalt, the sun, etc. are unloaded simantic words. All words have connotations, but some of them have such connotations that they are loaded.

(One inanimate object that I do find loaded is my laptop. Maybe because so much human speech comes through it, and so much of my own speech goes out through it, so it has become "humanized" to me.)

I think most people are naturally addicted to people and warp themselves and their view of reality to fit what some group "wants" them to believe. Our people-addiction causes us to have agendas for the people around us. Or agendas of getting away from them as fear-objects. We are so addicted to them that we fear them, even beyond whatever objective risk they may pose us with physical weapons. And thus if they rule us we are unable to see them as people. Prosociality makes it so you *have to* love the people around you, but since you don't choose to love them, it's not really you who loves them. So we are urged to love people, but that urge to love, if external, or internalized, is an obsessing, controlling force, an externalized or internal addiction, and it prevents us from really loving people.

This amounts to a bitter critique of (a) humanism. Can I offer anything better than that humanism? One thing I can offer is to say that being alone is fine. You're not going to die. You have to be weaned from your human addiction first, though, or else it might not work out. It helps to seek to love God, and to come to see the phenomenal world as spoken by him. When you live in a default state of "I-thou" connection with God, then you can be alone as much as you want.

The alternative to prosocial humanism isn't "ego" or insanity in a world where you are the only one who exists, but rather to become in tune with God on the level of phenomenal presence, where every experience is a message from God. You can be fed as much from God alone as from other people. Then, you don't have to be addicted to them.

There is some danger that if you are not addicted to people, they can't be used as tools to force you to grow up. Maybe people-addiction is a necessary slavery to help you grow closer to God? But it seems that there should be a more Millennial way to learn, and that God prefers to teach us things that way, because he dislikes the brutality of our lives as much as we do, and more so. Why can't God just guide us gently to learn directly from him? Why use people as bludgeons and acids on us? Maybe the problem is in us, to make us need people. But otherwise, I think that a person by themselves (with God), with perhaps some kind of food for thought, or perhaps either internalized or written-down Scripture, could learn the lessons of holiness, without other people being involved. Maybe when there is something "rough and uncomprehending" in us, like a sheep, we need to be treated like an animal. But we are sons and daughters of God, and we don't have to be animals (or children) all our lives -- instead, always children of God, but adult children instead. Perhaps some people need other people to help them overcome their sins. But it's better not to to take the rough and random path of a sheep, and instead to walk on the trail or road.

I do think it's possible that people need people because for some reason God is prevented from talking to us gently and directly, by some kind of negotiation with Satan. But then, like any other slavery, that's something to be escaped when possible, and considered lamentable when not possible.

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Sidebar: Thinking about addiction. I see a moderate Internet addiction in me. Trying ways to control that. Social media is addictive because we're addicted to people and information. I have to use social media (more or less) for practical purposes. But it's bad.

I grew up without a TV in the house. Someone I knew had a TV growing up but could only watch -- one hour a day? One hour a week? I don't remember exactly. Maybe I could try something like that with social media.

People who quit nicotine do other things to sort of exercise the habit. Looking at Indonesian Wikipedia is still a grabbing for information. But it feels less "loaded" or "Doritos-y" because the language isn't worn in to my mind, and the random pages I see talk about things that I'm not normally into sometimes.

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Now I've read up to the end of the first part, "Dialogue". I had thoughts after the first section within the part, but forgot them before I had the chance to write them down, and my mind was not deeply impressed by them, I guess. I do remember thinking that Buber's basic philosophy

articulates fairly well with simantism, could be a module added on to MSLN. I just read the second two sections, and didn't have as many thoughts. I think maybe sometime in the future I'll come back to the first section and see what I think -- maybe recover some of those thoughts I had -- but for now I'll move on.

Overall, it seems like Buber is preaching to the choir to people nowadays. I think to actually practice "dialogue" is not always done. But he sounds like a fairly mainstream humanist to my ears, though he expresses himself in a non-mainstream, philosophical way.

I like Buber more as a portal into the concept of wordless dialogue, and thus into relating to God, as part of epistemic and ethical theism. Also, it's interesting to think about how Buber's concepts of dialogue and being whole-souled would apply to nations. Can two nations experience an analogue of Buberian dialogue? Could a nation be whole-souled? It would have to be, I think, to be engage in what could be called Buberian international dialogue.

But, interpersonal relationships are important, and maybe it's good to hear his sermon again. (As though maybe a message starts off fresh / alien and fully confrontational and communicative, and then that exact message when it has become standard, assimilated, uncontroversial / familiar, is spoken to a "choir" ("preaching to the choir"), becomes a sermon.)

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up to p. 54 (The Question to the Single One, The Single One and his Thou)

Buber has been talking about how Kierkegaard seemed to think you should only address God as *Thou* (make God first relationally? Or even significant at all above a certain threshold?). Kierkegaard chooses renunciation (of Regine Olsen) so that he can love God.

On p. 54, Buber asks:
--Who is there who confesses the God whom Kierkegaard and I confess, who could suppose in decisive insight that God wants *Thou* to be truly said only to him, and to all others only an unessential and fundamentally invalid word -- that God demands of us to choose between him and his creation?--

Does Buber need God to be such that he does not demand of us to choose between him and his creation? I don't know if this is maybe a difference between a Jewish and Christian approach to things. Buber was certainly well-read in Christianity and allowed himself to be influenced by non-Jewish thoughts, so maybe a Christian approach to things via the cross would not be foreign to him after all. But maybe it would. And Kierkegaard, from my perspective not fully knowing his work but having some familiarity with it and his life story, seems particularly valuable as

an example of someone living out the cross. When the Romans come to burn the early Christians, the early Christians have a choice: God, or life? This choice could be seen as: God, or creation?, in that life is created by God and full of his creations. What kind of Christian can choose life over a death for God without shuddering at the betrayal? So for a Christian (or an aspiring Christian, perhaps) like Kierkegaard, it is a bit frightening to think of choosing creation over God. Even a Jew wouldn't want to make creation an idol. Maybe Buber would answer (as I think he does, in a way) that loving creation and loving God are inseparable. As though it is only possible to love God through creation.

I know from personal experience that it is possible to love God apart from love of creation. Maybe Buber had never experienced that. Maybe Kierkegaard had, and maybe had to "renounce" Regine (as if she were his prize) in order to learn it.

If you have to have creation, or you have to have renunciation, either of them seem like things that could turn out to be spiritually dangerous to you, keep you from fully loving God. It depends on the person as to which is more dangerous than the other.

I don't think that creation is something to not love at all. I think it should be loved like you love yourself, sort of in the background or as instrumental to your journey toward God. To help someone else on their journey is worth doing. But basically, I think everything should be oriented toward God. There should be an intimacy that each person has with God and not with anyone else.

I don't know about saying "an unessential and fundamentally invalid word" -- I wouldn't say that second place is that bad a prize for each person to take, while God takes first place. I tend to think that good love of people is a mixture of high-quality love, pristine like water from a mountain spring, and equally high-quality, pristine and clear, indifference. For me, I and the people around me, are bit players in my life story, as I would like to be in theirs, who do not need complex characterization, do not have to have our natures disclosed to the point of inciting intense will.

However, I understand that this is my perspective, and goes along with my more-monastic / celibate life experiences and preferences. Maybe I'm not as solitary as Kierkegaard? So I'm somewhere between Buber and Kierkegaard? But I think I lean more toward Kierkegaard in this.

I would guess that Buber, Kierkegaard, and I are/were all introverts. But, perhaps Buber was not as much an introvert as I am -- maybe Kierkegaard takes the prize of "most introverted", although when he was younger, he went out a lot. I don't want to "legislate" from the perspective of my own personal preferences. Maybe it's best for the "Buberians" to see the world in a more Buber-like way, and for the "Kierkegaardians" to see the world in a

more Kierkegaard-like way. I would still want to emphasize that despite personal temperament and life situations, making creation (or specific creations) into an idol is a real spiritual danger, one which even a "Buberian" should be careful to avoid. It's possible that I'm misinterpreting Buber, but I feel like he might be insisting that we can't renounce creation, and that feels dangerously close to saying we *have to* have it, and thus need it to be saved. I think that as long as a person loves God and is willing to go all the way to fully loving God, God is all they need.

But now I think about it, and I think maybe I could agree with Buber's emphasis on creation if we assume that human beings only become more holy through some kind of communication from God, and that the only way to communicate is through simantic words, each of which is a union of noetic relations and phenomenal content, which is about as much "created; a creation" as anything can be. Some kind of creation is necessary as a tool for God to communicate with us, and after all, both we and God are made out of simantic words. So maybe I don't see as strict a division between God and creation.

However, I think the blurring of God and creation is valid only on one level of reality (maybe that of "immaterialism"), while the difference, in a easygoing way, is seen on another (that of "simantism"), while the difference is seen in a sharper and starker way on yet another (that of "legitimism"). In other words, we all might be part of the same pages and have the same ink on us, us and God being one book. But the ink communicates words and characters doing things, and these have a distinct reality as they relate to each other. And then some words and characters refer to beings which are foundational to the whole book and who are in some sense higher (or truer) than all others. And within the story, the difference between the different characters is there.

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p. 62 (The Question to the Single One, The Single One and the Body Politic)

Buber says something like "marriage and being part of the body politic are ways that you are forced to confront others as others". Is this a good thing? How good is it, if it is good? Is it a necessary thing? If necessary, is it a praiseworthy thing or a necessary evil, or more or less neutral, or mixed?

I think if the greatest spiritual danger is egoism, then all manner of being bound to people and forced to deal with them so that you see other people as other is maybe necessary. And I think egoism can get in the way of people loving God. In other words, if you're stuck in yourself, then you can't seek God. Maybe you can be broken out of yourself by being forced to confront people deeply. Will you then go to seek God? Some people will, some people won't. I think the greatest spiritual danger is to not love

God with all of your being. So making "marriage and dealing with the body politic" a big deal is potentially misleading by emphasizing an instrumental means to loving God as an end in itself. I'm not sure that Buber makes this mistake, exactly, but I feel like his text emphasizes the humanist angle to this question, which I think does push on "you need to confront other people to see them as others through marriage or the body politic in order to be saved".

Marriage has its challenges, but so does celibacy. I would read the challenges of marriage not as essentially being most valuable as ways of teaching you to see the other as other and thus to get out of egoism, but to be sources of disestablishedness, which enable us to seek God. Celibacy can be a source of disestablishedness as well.

Marriage brings with it a kind of unfreedom -- either your spouse restrains you from being yourself, or along with your spouse you are incentivized to remain whatever self you've negotiated yourselves to become together. Maybe you can change, together, or become an ideal together, but there's an obvious danger to "regressing to the mean" if you can't intentionally coordinate your spiritual movements. The mean says "do what's default in your culture" and if the two of you can't both pick the same non-default to go down, you won't support each other, or even might undermine each other, but you will tend to continue to support the default in each other.

Celibacy brings with it a kind of poverty. Speaking generally, a celibate person is free, but poor, while a married person is wealthy, but unfree. Poverty causes the celibate person to seek God, while unfreedom causes the married person to seek God. There is trouble in the celibate's life as well as in the married person's life, and that trouble can disestablish, leading to the opportunity to be close to God.

I'll guess, maybe following Buber, that one can draw an analogy between participation in the body politic and marriage, that it has similar attractions, troubles, upsides, and downsides.

p. 62
--But to this we are led by marriage, if it is real, with a power for which there is scarcely a substitute, by its steady experiencing of the life-substance of the other as other, and still more by its crises and the overcoming of them which rises out of the organic depths, whenever the monster of otherness, which blew on us with its icy demon's breath and now is redeemed by our risen affirmation of the other, which knows and destroys all negation, is transformed into the mighty angel of union of which we dreamed in our mother's womb.--

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pp. 62 - 65 (still in the The Single One and the Body Politic section)

Buber goes on to say something like that the body politic consists both of the "near-neighbor" (my term) or "private sphere" (Buber's term) connections, at such a small scale that you can really feel how you are a part of it and also relate to all the members as individual people; and also the "public sphere" (Buber's term), where you can't grasp the individuality or concreteness of each person.

One of them lends itself to being "the crowd" that Kierkegaard doesn't like (the public sphere), but the other doesn't (the private sphere). Buber says "the crowd" happens when people are caught up in a mass moment, like with some protests, or when public opinion invalidates private opinion, where people give up their own thinking to fit in. Buber does see the danger in this, but thinks that the body politic goes beyond this "crowd".

I don't know what Kierkegaard meant by "the crowd is untruth", but a possible way that "crowd" can be "untruth" (or at least "untrustworthy in a way related to knowing and believing") is when you outsource your responsibility to know the truth and to relate to God, *yourself*, to the people around you. You go to church and the church worships God, but you don't. Or you only do with part of your being and sort of "go along with the ride" of the church. Or you are part of a small group of friends, and you find yourself filled by your conviviality and your particularness, but that filling keeps you from really hungering for God and/or the truth. It isn't exactly fair to call the "near-neighbors" of Buber's private sphere a "crowd", but I can see how Kierkegaard's "Single One" should still be concerned about Buber's private sphere with all its belonging and concreteness, with its temptation to keep the Single One from really directly facing and seeking God and the truth.

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I don't want to make it sound like singleness, celibacy, poverty, etc. are completely safe, in contrast to conviviality, marriage, and wealth. I do think that the latter three are more appealing and therefore tempting than the former three. But, single, celibate, poor people should be aware that in their isolation and poverty, they are likely to do things that are desperate, or be tempted to doing those things. Hunger taken generally is good because one of the hungers is the hunger for God and truth. But there are specific hungers which are bad, or even not worth feeling.

It is always possible to favor singleness, celibacy, and poverty over God, and to not obey God's specific desires for how we are supposed to work for him, because of those biases. I think that it's tempting to think that when life seems to make sense, it reflects God's will. I think there's something to that heuristic that when life draws you toward something that is on some level positive, it's God's will for you, but it may not be the basically positive thing that God really wants for you. You may find yourself drawn toward a providentially-ordained-looking job, for instance, and think that

it was God who ordained it through all the events of timing, and "opened doors", through which it came. And, given your heart and your previous life choices, it probably was God saying, this is my plan for you, accept it. But if you had a more faithful heart or made better decisions in the past, you might have been given something else, which God would have liked better. God makes life choices make sense to us, often, by blessing us, because that's how we trust him and how our motivations flow. We conceive of blessing, more automatically, through the lens of conviviality, marriage, and wealth. So we are probably biased, more often, to think that conviviality, marriage, and wealth go along with doing God's will, when that may not be the case.

Still, it could be the case that God wants a celibate person to marry in order to work for God better, as much as it could be the case that God wants a person seeking marriage to choose to be celibate instead, in order to work for God better.

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Finished The Question to the Single One.

I have to say that I have only been reading in a somewhat superficial way. Something about Buber's writing style defeats my attempts to read it. When I look carefully, it seems like he uses understandable words with understandable grammar, but somehow I have a hard time connecting with his sentences. Maybe in some cases he's writing about realities which I have not seen? I suspect that my own writing is in some way not fully readable to everyone.

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Read Education.

Similarly hard to connect with Buber's sentences here. I did find it somewhat helpful to read the writing under my breath.

Had some good ideas, and may be worth reading if you're interested in education. The part that stood out to me most was this (p. 98; the eighth "conglomeration of paragraphs":)

--The relation in education is one of pure dialogue.

--I have referred to the child, lying with half-closed eyes waiting for his mother to speak to him. But many children do not need to wait, for they know that they are unceasingly addressed in a dialogue which never breaks off. In face of the lonely night which threatens to invade, they lie preserved and guarded, invulnerable, clad in the silver mail of trust.

--Trust, trust in the world, because this human being exists -- that is the most inward achievement of the relation in education. Because this human

being exists, meaninglessness, however hard pressed you are by it, cannot be the real truth. Because the human being exists, in the darkness the light lies hidden, in fear salvation, and in the callousness of one's fellow-men the great Love.--

To me it seems that this means something like "a teacher, though supposedly they are teaching a subject, is really becoming a sort of figure in the inner landscape of a child, enabling the child to trust". The child is able to have "security trusting" (Joseph Godfrey's term from *Trust of People, Words, and God*), trust in the universe as a whole, because a human steps in to perform a certain role, by being a certain person who happens to be put in the child's life in order to teach a subject.

When a student learns, they are the ones who teach themselves, and the teacher can only help so far. So the student must trust enough to take the chance of being wrong, or of stepping out into "darkness" (all the confusing and unknown things which make up the world before we learn) to make it into "light" (clarity and knowledge). To existentially trust, overall, enables self-trust, and trust of the educational process, so that oneself and one's task of learning can be connected with.

The image of a "dialogue that never breaks off" is how I experience my relationship with God. In a way it does have interruptions, like how the mother isn't constantly with the child (I would suppose) in Buber's image. But it also doesn't. I don't think this dialogue is something I can completely take for granted, but I do think that in reality it has been going on my whole life, at some level or other, whether I realized it or not. I can't take for granted that I will always be open to God or be on the path to being open to God. But God is always open to me, unless and until I completely reject him.

I think it's appealing to think of the child relating to the mother (and thus each person relating to God) according to a purely wordless dialogue. Buber is particularly valuable as someone who points out that wordless dialogue happens. But mothers are persons and not just "eternal Thous", and as persons, they may say something (with words), that a child needs to hear, understand, and perhaps obey. Similarly with God. We need to trust God in how he supports us, in some ways wordlessly, and also to trust his words which tell us what he values, what he commands, and who he is.

It is safe to assume that if you completely trust God and follow him, you will be safe in the end. But part of trusting God involves going out to look for the words which he has already spoken, and learning the principles with which we can identify those words when they are present all around us. So we have to take action, and often initiative, in trusting God. Also, trusting God is something we have to consciously renew at some points, and there is danger there.

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Read The Education of Character.

This is the most clearly-written part (at least to me). I think for many people it would be the best thing to read first of this book. If they like it, they could read the preceding parts which reinforce it, and if they want further reinforcement, they could read *I and Thou*.

I can see applications to cultural altruism. It occurs to me that one way to try to solve the problem of determining the best values is to see what kind of people we have to be to really teach values. The values of good teachers are the right ones for everyone to have. Buber's text might support "being whole-souled", or maybe a little further from his wording and maybe not 100% the same concept, but one which goes along with it "not being fake" / "being real". I don't know that a "morality of good teaching" determines enough, but it seems like it is a good thing to make sure is in your axiology.

Politics is culture war, but what if it were conceived of as education? Could political people become educators?

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Reflecting a bit before going on in the book...

One danger of being into Buber's philosophy is that if you are really into the concrete personal being in front of you, then you will reshape your mind somewhat to only be attuned to concrete personal beings in front of you, and you may neglect distant or future people, or God.

I don't know if this is fair to apply to Buber himself, but I get the feeling when I read his philosophy that it would appeal to and encourage people who tend to think that to love God reduces to loving people. Certainly, when you love people in a concrete, personal, instinctual way, that love is much heavier and real-seeming than the love you might try to have for God. But is that compelling feeling trustworthy? The compelling feeling a young man has that he will marry "Alice" is also what he will later feel for "Brenda", "Calypso", "Diana", and "Elysia". And he won't marry any of them and in many cases, it never would have been a good idea if he had. Or the compelling feeling of shame and failure someone may feel may seem persuasive and true, but they shouldn't kill themselves. The feeling that you are going to marry someone someday is beautiful, and the feeling that you are shameful and a failure is (brutally) real, and weighty. Is it the case that if you feel a compelling feeling for the concrete person in front of you that is beautiful and real, you have found the truth? Or is it still possible for that to be misleading in some way? Could it be that loving people is a subset of love, and that you need to love God as well? Or do we simply know, in a wordless way, that concrete personal love is the highest, when

we feel it, and because we know it wordlessly, no words can speak against it?

Maybe practically speaking it's easy to deal with this dilemma by pointing out that for people to have true well-being, they need to love God, and they need to love as God loves. For us, this means that we must both love in the concrete personal way, and love the distant and future beings, because God loves in a concrete personal way, and God also loves all beings, including those distant to us, and future beings. I'm not sure Buber would object to this, but I think the emphasis of his writing could appeal to or motivate people who don't see things this way.

A related danger is that because of Buber's emphasis on the concrete personal, and finding God in ordinary lived life, one might think that this life is all that matters, and the first death is all that matters. I think human instincts say very clearly that the first death matters. Caring about the second death is physically more difficult, but (I think) if you think, you will see that the second death matters, and matters far more than the first death. It can be difficult to reconcile the compelling instinctual moment with its heavy, loud speech with the quiet voice that you have to work to obey. Going with your instincts feels more natural and even humble, more honest. Using those three feelings as criteria can help you avoid bad thinking sometimes. But if your instincts are out of touch with reality, the naturalness, humility, and honesty you feel can be misleading.

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Caring about the second death is something that (some) teachers do. Do healers do it? Buber seems like he would appeal to the helping professions, to teachers and social workers, but also doctors and especially therapists and psychiatrists. It seems that the whole mindset of a healer (which Buber's philosophy fits into well) is a powerful one, but if it's focused primarily or exclusively on the first death, it is a dangerously misleading one.

One might say that healing precedes teaching. If you have a terrible stomachache, you probably can't learn most lessons. I can see that, but I suspect that the process of healing can involve some hidden tradeoff, the signing of some hidden contract.

One hidden contract can be that you "have to" adopt the identity of a sick person. You have to say "I am a sick person in need of help." You have to make the inner part of you, your "I", or even "I"-saying, sick, and then (ideally), you can get healing of all the flesh and clothes around that inner part. Are you ever allowed to say "Okay, I'm not a sick person in need of help anymore, I'm out of here."? Some healers (and parts of "health culture") let you do it. But others don't want you to.

Is this a problem? If you adopt the identity of "I am a sick person in need

of help", it does things to you. You are fearful, guilty, needy and thus unhappy, and you don't trust yourself. You adopt the identity of a small person, and not a large person. This mentality keeps you from fighting evil most effectively. All you can do is heal and need, you can't be a soldier. It inhibits vision. It may pave the way to giving in to some temptations. You may feel a need to control or infect people who are healthy in the way that you are not, because you think that it's morally wrong for people to think they are healthy, even if by making them think they are unhealthy, they become unhealthy.

I would say that I'm okay with valuing healing if it produces that innermost healing, but even being healthy in that way doesn't necessarily make you a good person. But what if healing could actually end up causing people to be holy?

The trick is that healing is something that can be done to someone, and can be passively received. If you have an abscess, you could be in a coma and someone could remove it, and you could benefit from that operation, without even consenting to it. But the critical element of morality, of coming into tune with God, is that it is something you do yourself. To turn toward God is an action you must take. Nobody can make you take that action, or engineer that action in you. You must consciously do it yourself. So the healing of the innermost person may be helpful because when that part is healed, it is easier (I think) to say "I can do things", among those things, to repent. But, of course, this kind of healing only leads people to the water, and they can choose not to drink. Maybe teaching leads them closer to the water, and should be provided, but they still can choose not to drink.

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Thinking about Buber overall, makes me think about the Kantian idea that one should treat people as ends and not as means. I feel like I exist as means and not as an end, and I naturally see the people around me as means. We are all background characters in each other's stories, and the real story is how each of us seeks God. I exist as means to the end of other people being means. I am means toward the interests of Legitimacy. I will always be means for that and I will never be done with that. Legitimacy is what is most valuable, and so I will always be an instrument toward it/him/them. Legitimacy is a person and a community of persons. The "head of state" and "head of government" of Legitimacy is God. We will always be means toward the (ongoing) end of what is really right, and what is really right is a person.

I'm not sure what Buber would make of that last paragraph. I haven't read *I and Thou* in a long time, so there are probably details to what Buber says there -- possibly details in the first part of *Between Man and Man* that I missed or have already forgotten -- which close off some degrees of

freedom in what I can say about Buber with respect to this question, but I can say a few provisional things now. Buber has "I-Thou" relations and "I-It", as though we relate to people as ends in themselves without agendas, or as parts of our agendas. But I perhaps want to say that there is some kind of relationship whereby another person is part of God's agenda, and I am part of God's agenda. If "God's agenda" is really just my agenda, then I think effectively that's an I-It relationship. But if "God's agenda" is something that is out of my control, then maybe it's closer to an I-Thou relationship. But that other person does not exist in a freestanding way, and neither do I. This way, there is always a purpose to people, always an ethical orientation, and people never exist in their own rights, but are inherently oriented toward God. Does God relate to people in an I-Thou way if they must be oriented toward his agenda? The idea of Legitimacy says that God and God's agenda are one thing. So an agenda can relate personally to people, at least, God can. But I think God's relationships with us would be either a mix of I-Thou and I-It, or something else orthogonal to those categories.

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Finished reading Part 5: What is Man?, Section One: The Progress of the Question.

I guess my main response is to think about the ideas of cosmos, infinity, and the asking of the question "what is man?". Buber sees a pattern where people find a way to fit man into the cosmos, giving them security, and then they don't deeply ask the question "what is man?". Some people, though, see infinity and man has no place in the cosmos, or stands out, or is alone in some way and is forced to see himself in a strange or alien way, asking "what is man?".

The MSLN response, I could say, is that the cosmos is just God and you, and peripherally the other people connected to God. The cosmos is also what God speaks to you. So there is a two-fold cosmos. In the base reality, you, God, and each other person, all is finite. But God can speak the simantic word of infinity to you. And you and he will experience it to the full. God feels the depth that you feel when you ask "who am I?" or "what is man?", though he knows more about you or about humans, all that there is to know. He is as bewildered as you are, and perhaps he wonders sometimes "who am I?" or "what is God?", even if he knows all the facts that can be known about himself, and understands how those facts work together. He may not be ignorant about himself the way that we usually are, but still find his own existence to be a thing of wonder, that is even heartbreaking.

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Thinking back to the "Kierkegaard / Buber debate". I take "Kierkegaard" to

be a representative of "sometimes you need to renounce the people you love in order to love God" and "Buber" to be a representative of "you never need to renounce the people you love in order to love God because to love them is to love God". Both these positions seem necessary, correct, compelling, and wrong.

I think it is important to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. I think I have a capacity to love God through loving people, and a capacity for loving God exclusively, with no other people admitted to that part of my life. In order to love God with all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength, I have to offer what is exclusive to God through an exclusive relationship, and offer what is communal to God through a more typically Buberian relationship in which others are admitted. It's a bad idea for "Buber" to miss out on the essential message of "Kierkegaard", and vice versa. Kierkegaard might have been right about Regine Olsen (or her life reality) occupying a part of him that only should have been given to God, requiring him to renounce her. Buber might be right that sometimes renunciation is not what God wants us to do, and that relating to people may not keep God out of our lives.

It is also important to love God with all of your being and love your neighbor as yourself. The theistic has to take precedence over the human. Relating to people in such a way that you relate to God is somewhat dangerous, if it really turns out to be a case of loving your neighbor, that pays lip service to theism, or even a case where you really do love God through loving your neighbor, but the way in which you love God is not you loving God with all of your being -- rather, maybe, you don't love with all of your being, or you love your neighbor with all of your being, or you love the totality of humans with all of your being, or even somehow you love yourself with all of your being.

The road of renunciation and theism is hard and unpopular, and "Buber" takes the path that is healthier and more sane. So "Buber"'s is the way that will become more popular, typically, and thus in the long run "Buber" is more dangerous than "Kierkegaard", if there is some way in which "Buber" "binds to the receptor" of the part of us that needs what "Kierkegaard" uniquely offers.

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Finished reading Part 5, Section Two: Modern Attempts.

This is the end of the book, except for the Afterword. At this point I would say that my response to the book is, I would change the emphasis of it from "between man and man" to "between person and person" or "between personal being and personal being", so that this "between" thing can be satisfied between a human and God, and not just between a human and a human.

I think the book overall can be good to read, for those interested in personhood, the question of "what is a person?", and the relationship between personal beings. I agree with Buber that individualism (a true individualism that excludes God) and collectivism both sound like bad tendencies and Buber's "between" sounds better. I think Buber is kind of saying what is now "received wisdom" (like what Scott Alexander pointed out about Hobbes seeming obvious in retrospect). We all know that we should relate one on one in rich ways so that we see each other's humanity. So it's not an exciting message, it seems, in this current moment as far as I can see online. David Brooks is into Buber, that's true. But I don't see a lot of people on Twitter talking about Buber, unlike the Gen Z(/ Millennial?) Simone Weil trend. Someone I once knew pointed out that the problem with Buber is that only nice people read him. I don't know how true that is, but it sounds plausible. Part of me wants to point out that nice people probably feel strengthened when they read Buber, and producing cultural artifacts that pretty much just strengthen nice people is a good thing. But part of me sees my interlocutor's point, which is that you have to change the minds of "bad guys" or "sensible guys" more than saying the same old thing to "nice guys". I feel like Buber doesn't get "nice guys" to change the world, at least, I don't feel him motivating me very much, assuming I'm a "nice guy".

Perhaps one of the defects of Buber's teaching is that he favors agendalessness. You can do a lot of good in an agendaless way, but some good (probably) can't be done in an agendaless way. So, maybe a good adjunct to Buber's teaching of promoting one on one, small group dialogue, is for agenda-based people to figure out ways to engineer those experiences. My guess is that there are a decent number of churches that think about things like this, whether they are aware of Buber or not. I don't know if secular groups think this way, but I would bet at least one school and at least one business has tried to incorporate these ways of thinking. Possibly even the military, as ironic as that might sound (building esprit de corps is important, even if your combat unit is being trained to kill people, which, it's hard to avoid thinking in some way is a denial of their humanity).

This points out how agendas consume agendaless people. The agendaless thing to do is to love your family and support them. Then, they will go off and work for a collectivity, like a multinational corporation, which will perhaps cheat people, exploit the environment, dodge taxes, develop technology that moves us closer to being able to destroy civilization -- and then whatever taxes are paid by your family will go to the other big collectivity, the government, which pays for wasteful and yet all-too-effective wars. I don't think Buber was naive enough to think that you can avoid all agendas and all agenda-ed thinking. But, it might be tempting, if anyone got really excited about this book, for them to ignore the bigger picture (perhaps even pointed to within the book in passing) of how we

have to use "I-It" thinking, or use tough-minded mental software like desert watchfulness, or warlike determination, or doing math, or something in that vein, as opposed to the beautiful and timeless-feeling meetings that happen between... humans and humans... when they get into their own dimension, as Buber puts it in the very last chapter of this section ("Prospectus"). People read books, and reality, for their emphasis, sometimes, as opposed to their details.

Having said all those caveats, I do think that as relatively unexciting as Buber's main teaching might be to some people, to enter that timeless-feeling, present place is a good thing to learn, and I've certainly gotten a lot out of Buber's wordless dialogue, especially as explicated in the dream at the very beginning of the book. Maybe Buber's teaching (like some others out there) is a good song to practice until its second nature, as an etude even if not as the most exciting four-chord anthem.

Now, having appeared to have given a conclusion to these notes, I should read Buber's Afterword...

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Finished reading the Afterword. I don't have anything to add here.

Labels: #book review, #Christianity, #education, #God, #Judaism, #marriage, #Martin Buber, #mental health, #relationships, #what is a person?

Book Review: Creative Destruction by Tyler Cowen

%book-review-creative-destruction-by

Wednesday, September 21, 2022

See also the preview for this review (found toward the end of the post).

I wrote the notes for this review a while ago, and don't remember the book very well, which would be better if I were trying to write a proper review. Here are the notes.

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[Notes:]

p. 5 --Growing up in an out-of-the-way locale limits an individual's access to the world's treasures and opportunities less than ever before. This change represents one of the most significant increases in freedom in human history.--

In my preview for *Creative Destruction*, I mentioned the phenomenon of people finding (in Cowen's terms) "treasures" for the first time, having had a real lack for them. So, there are two stases: the purely local stasis, where you only have local culture, and the global stasis, when you "only have everything", a limitation on your appreciation of things given that all of them are so easy to find and so automatically familiar. In between is the era when local stases break open by contacting each other.

Maybe in a global stasis, young people always start in a relatively isolated place, and then as they grow up eventually reach the point where they have been exposed to the basics of all world culture, and nothing can really refresh or surprise them. This implies that young people start off as perhaps very similar newborns, and then as they grow up, differentiate into their uniqueness by exploring, but further exploration mellows them out and indoctrinates them by way of sarkar and habitus into homogenized adults, who all have the same enormous "desk of objects" and the same way of selecting them for consideration.

Traditional cultures maybe all resemble each other in certain ways, because the basic "desk" of hunter-gatherer lifestyles and human biology is fairly similar wherever you go, but they are not identical. Maybe newborns are very similar to each other superficially, but by age two or three children display distinct personalities, at least prototypically. But all pre-school kids who live in the same society and class tend to have similar

"desks". In the era of cross-fertilization of children (and cultures), which is already starting in pre-school (and traditional cultures), and which continues for many years (or generations), children (cultures) adopt ideas from each other and grow in maturity, until -- with children, perhaps they start becoming less unique as they develop, once they are fully out of adolescence, perhaps, as they become more well-rounded -- but with cultures, we could only guess that that will happen. Maybe it has already begun happening with cultures?

I remember reading in a book on the history of Hinduism (*Hinduism Through the Ages* by D. S. Sarma) about how Western ideas affected the practice of Hinduism, I guess how Indians looked up to Westerners. For instance, the downregulation of caste, and the end of burning widows with their husbands. Generally, I know that in the West, notably in the 1960s, "Eastern thinking" has been brought in to make the West more balanced. Arguably, a well-rounded human must be both Western and Eastern. An archetype of a well-rounded human can be found in Jesus, who seems (to me) to be both Eastern and Western. Presumably, we will inevitably become well-rounded, because that's the "gravity" or "destiny" of personal development. Which well-rounded person will we be? Will we be Jesus? Or will we be someone else? Will we have a choice at that point? Or will "well-rounding" always converge on "only everything"?

If I want to criticize Jesus, or at least, the image of him, if not the living person, I would say that the Jesus-like spirit leads to a kind of end of thinking and of identity. Christianity is (or at least can be) about ending the world, and ending being a human through a kind of blissed out maturity (like casting crowns over and over). I fear that Christianity is not about reality, or at least that it's easy for me to recall the anti-real aspects of Christianity, and I don't feel like the Christian culture around me makes me recall the pro-real aspects.

Immaturity intrudes on people such that they really want to be mature. So it's good to have a picture of maturity to be a guide in the process of becoming more mature. But maturity has its downsides. The Jesus-focusedness of Christianity I think is a dangerous thing if mishandled. I suspect that global culture will tend toward something similar to Jesus-focusedness on its own. And I am concerned that in either case, we are optimizing ourselves to fit a false ending. Like running a race that has five laps instead of four, but everyone cheers and comes to help you off the track after four laps -- the real finishers of that race have to ignore social reality.

Now, as a Christian, I am partly encouraged by how in the long run (if I am correct) the gravity of being a human bends individuals and cultures toward being like Jesus and/or being compatible with Jesus. I think that a very Jesus-oriented vision of human personality is an improvement for most people over where they start. But we forget sometimes that Jesus

wasn't the point of his own religion, rather the Father was. And so as we become more like Jesus, if we are getting "too good" at being like Jesus or being compatible with him or his image, we should reset our eyes on the horizon that is coming into view as we, like Jesus, relate primarily to the Father. I don't think this is unorthodox at all, but it isn't maximally "Christian" if Christianity has to be all about Jesus, perhaps by its very name.

The Father's/Yahweh's relationship with the people of Israel feels younger to me, about a young world with a long way to go. We all have a long way to go, at least as individuals. But the overly Jesus-like spirit makes us feel like life is over and that we are walking step by step toward heaven. But in reality, we still have to go through the long process of really learning to repent. The world can feel very culturally "late" (maybe it is getting too well-rounded), and on many dimensions we may be figuring ourselves out culturally (thus, personally and morally), but we don't realize that we have a long way to go toward really being in tune with God. We shouldn't expect to go to heaven when we die, but rather to be resurrected to "1,000" years of completely overcoming each sinful habit we have, and growing in love for God until we really, literally love God with all of our beings. Maybe we are like seniors in high school, fading out into June. But most of life is after high school.

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Societal change comes from people joining movements -- largely true. People who join movements tend to be people who are in some way unbalanced, people seeking identities from outside themselves, or in other ways not self-sufficient psychologically. They hunger and move, and join.

So maybe if people are trained by their cultures to be more well-rounded at a younger age, the pool of people who will join movements is reduced. If a civilization still needs movements, maybe it shoots itself in the foot if it has a rich culture that everyone can access.

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p. 8

Cowen talks about how Western materials like knives, and Western ideas (like carving soapstone, taught to the Inuit by a Westerner), invigorate indigenous art.

However, while this seems like something that could obtain for a while, what happens when the indigenous people stop being "indigenous people who happen to use Western elements in making their indigenous art" to "basically not indigenous people, who can't make indigenous art anymore", people whose "desks" have changed so radically that they no longer can think in traditional patterns or have the natural appetite or longing to

produce those patterns? Could it be that in the long run, exposure to Western ideas (or even materials) erodes that way of thinking or those patterns? Probably in some cases it does, and in others, it doesn't. Certainly prosperity and economic development ("prosperity" and "economic development" as defined by the West, or perhaps really "the gravity of human appetites") seems to threaten indigenous cultures, by giving them a new, world-homogenized "desk" from which to naturally speak as artists.

The art itself might not suffer, since artists can always be into folk patterns as professionals, or as amateurs but still as artists, rather than as people who deeply belong to the folk culture, perhaps who almost can't imagine not being part of it. [It's unclear to me what I meant by "perhaps who almost can't imagine not being part of it".] If the creative appetites of modern artists continue to value folk art, it will continue, but if they don't happen to, the old art may die out. If the traditional cultures persist, then the old art won't die out (probably; or by definition of "traditional cultures persist").

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p. 9

--In all of these examples, the notable creators are active, searching artists, drawing on many sources to produce the sought-after aesthetic effect. These points do not denigrate non-Western artists or imply that they "owe it all to the West." It is the contrary emphasis on monoculture that insults, by portraying non-Western artists as unchanging and static craftworkers, unable to transcend their initial styles for synthetic improvements.--

I guess the monocultural emphasis might insult non-Western artists by portraying them as unchanging and static craftworkers if we think of art in terms that I would guess are Western or modern (that good artists are like little creator-gods who are judged on their ability to make new things). But why should we think that those Western or modern values about art are any more valid than to say that an artist is good if, through perhaps a great deal of care and intention, they bring about in the world that which was handed down to them?

I guess that question is one that implies that there is a radically different way of viewing the world than Cowen's, and I know Cowen limits his book to being about specific things, which may exclude considering that more traditional, family-based, perhaps political view of the world, by defining the project of his book to simply answer questions within his own worldview, which is more modern, individualist, and economic.

P. 5 talks about how Cowen is limiting his book's project, but I can't figure out if that supports what I said in this paragraph about him possibly defining away concerns about his fundamental worldview by limiting his

book's project. It may be the case that his (p. 5 words) "artistic creativity" can be construed broadly enough to include a question of what creativity really is, deep enough to question the modern worldview. On the other hand, he is clear that wants to ask about freedoms available "in the marketplace", and the word "marketplace" may be defined by him to be inherently modern / economic. In any case, despite how Cowen may or may not be limiting himself, readers of his book are not limited in that way, and can consider deeper questions.

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Finished Chapter 1.

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Finished Chapter 2.

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In Ch. 3, Cowen talks about "ethos", the look and feel of art, which develops in tandem with the world view of a society. Art's ethos is threatened by the artist knowing too much, perhaps by losing their "delusion" (p. 54) to being special or important, or their particular worldview, which must be one of many worldviews, none of which is exclusively true. What kind of people can believe in their worldview strongly enough to produce truly excellent art, when they are surrounded by many other worldviews? Isn't it probably false to believe in anything deeply?

This may mean that much art can only be produced in isolation, even from a cosmopolitan market that would like to be able to look at all art. From an MSLN point of view, though, all such art can be seen by one "cosmopolitan", at least, God. God values all good things, including the ethos and art of all traditions, insofar as they are not sinful.

Cowen notes (p. 53) --Many Third World and indigenous artisans view their crafts as imbued with great religious and mythic significance, and as having central importance for the unfolding of history. In reality, they may be "just another craftsperson" in the eyes of the outside world, but their creativity will be greater if this knowledge is not rubbed in their faces.--

Maybe the outside world puts them in a box, refusing to consider that they (among so many other worldviews) might be correct? If there is to be a unified worldview for all people (helping prevent international competition and conflict), then how can it minimize the damage done to these artisans (and by extension their home cultures who share their ethos)?

I think a simantist way to deal with this is to say "everything is a word which stands between and connects a person to God". Let's suppose that all

the religions are at least partially wrong. Perhaps Calvinism is wrong, but is uniquely beautiful in some way. (I'll pick one concrete example that I've used before.) Calvinist devotion becomes a prayer between the Calvinist and God, a poem which both share. God, even supposing he is not the God of Calvinism, finds a kind of (perhaps austere) beauty in that vision of him, and knows that that beauty speaks to the hearts and minds of Calvinists, motivating them to love him. Even if ex-Calvinists on some level know that God is not literally the God of Calvinism, they can retain that old image, as something more than mere art but something less than the literal truth. And we could extend this idea to all the religions and quasi-religions, all with their visions of God, beauty, truth, and the good.

(Perhaps people of a certain background would talk about their old gods as parts of the imaginal world, in which they are real.)

So, the artisan is doing something important by preserving a culture that has given way, in the literal realm, to a universal culture. This does change the quality of the importance (by which I mean, not how good the importance is, but more like, what specific kind), for better or worse. (Perhaps you can't believe that your artwork prevents the universe from collapsing or brings the rain.) But the magnitude of the importance might remain, as your art becomes a way to pray to God. A God, who loves everything that is good, including much of what is in every culture that has been loved by people.

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Finished Chapter 3.

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p. 87 - 88 --In economic terms, the countries of Western Europe are more likely to resemble each other than are the American states. Most of the American states have no steel industry, no automobile industry, and no wheat industry; instead they buy the products of these industries from other states or countries. But typically a nation of western Europe has its own steel, automobile, dairy, and agricultural sectors, largely because of subsidies and protectionism. Free trade within the United States allows states and regions to specialize to a high degree and causes their economic profiles to diverge; in a freer economic environment, the economies of western Europe would take the same path.--

I wonder if this has anything to do with political polarization. Perhaps certain economic roles are taken by people of certain political views. Or, performing certain economic roles predisposes people to taking certain political views. In America, perhaps we can segregate our country on economic and thus political lines more, with greater geographic and thus social separation, more because we have free trade within it, and this causes us to be more polarized. If we could interact in person and on a

local level, it would do more to reduce polarization than if we interact online or quasi-interact by consuming news that talks about the same events. But geographic specialization keeps us from doing that. (A thought / theory.)

[We could always have "pen pals" or the equivalent with people in non-"Our Tribe" parts of the US. Say you are a blue state person and you send a conservative an email saying, "Hey, would you like to be my one 'red state' friend?" (or that's the spirit of it and soon enough both of you realize that). There might be suspicions of "carpetbagging" in the conservative's mind. It might feel weird to you as a blue-stater, as something not following from your real life and real interests. But the virtue of the local world is that it is a limited thing. You are limited in the local world. You can't move in an out of it as easily as in the virtual world, and there are fewer people to pick from, so you might associate with people less like you. You might have some reason to be "forced" into interaction with the conservative, so that you're not saying to yourself or them "I am a blue stater who is going out of my way to befriend a red stater for political reasons" (even if those political reasons are "to reduce polarization"). I think this might obtain in a small enough town, although in cities we have ways of effectively segregating ourselves -- whole suburbs or tracts of the main city that we never frequent, where the "other tribe" lives.]

If AGI causes a lot of economic growth, could it free people to adopt new ways of life, and thus new political views? Perhaps to have a way of life that is chosen for political reasons, rather than first as a way to make a living. In parallel to choosing a lifestyle for religious reasons -- and maybe politics and religion would begin to merge, because they would both be about values or ideals and less about "secular" concerns that really are parameterized by the difficulties in making a living (the mechanics of economic production, for instance, or the struggle to keep your body and mind functioning such that you can do a job). How can we *really* be the kind of people who support depolarization (or any other Cause X)? Maybe people would move into different parts of the country to try to depolarize it.

[Even in a world with advanced VR, the very limitedness of physical locality could make it more effective for certain tasks than VR. The aforementioned benefit of having less choice and thus more forced interaction with "other" people is one. Another being that identity is about being something, and the harder it is to not be that thing anymore, the stronger the identity can be. To choose to live in the same physical environment is a more costly signal than to frequent the same VR space. (You could say "well, isn't body modification even costlier than moving to the same place?" I suppose there's precedent with pre-modern tribes tattooing their members or the like. How do you know that someone has

really modified their body unless you're in the same locality as them? Maybe there could be some kind of "certificate of authenticity"? I'm not sure I would want my identity signaled by any irrevocable body modification, but some people would want to do that, I guess.)]

[On the other hand, maybe identity is also signaled strongly not just by how you're forced to choose it, but by how much you choose it, out of freedom, despite your options. Still, to decide to limit yourself (by moving to the "goth hub" or "libertarian rural state" or "Catholic neighborhood" or whatever, thus keeping yourself out of all other neighborhoods to a large extent) is you choosing something strongly. The choice, in this view, is stronger the more you know about other options. And, perhaps is stronger the more you have the opportunity to leave -- "I keep choosing you even though I could leave if I wanted to." I guess this means that the possibility of divorce makes marriage more meaningful, even though marriage is about making it hard to leave someone.]

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Finished Chapter 4.

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Cowen talks about "least common denominators" in culture (pp. 107 - 108). The phenomenon of making markets bigger enables people to try to capture really big audiences by being really bland or mainstream. But simultaneously, the number of viable audiences, sufficient to overcome fixed costs, also goes up.

My thought: So it's possible to have a more intensified mainstream and a more intensified fringe at the same time, which means that you can have greater division between the part of the culture that is into the mainstream and that which is not.

I feel like there is a shear between the "San Diego" world (in the sense of, the people I know locally) and the "Internet" world. I live in both, but my habitus-brain for each is significantly different. In "San Diego", life will go on, business-as-usual. But on the "Internet" I see AGI coming. Perhaps this mainstream-fringe shear produces some of the difficulty in getting people to notice things before it is too late. Could it be that if there was some way to resist that shear (not necessarily by being against globalization), it would allow us to have a more politically effective and better informed populace, greater national unity, and mass culture that is better for people?

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Somewhat of an aside:

One advantage of globalization is that it helps people have global

consciousness, which I think is a good in itself, and which helps people to do the most good. Is it possible to have global consciousness and maintain local culture? I am not really sure.

Despite the fact that ever since the Internet became available to me, roughly 20 years ago, I could have looked up Indonesia, I mostly haven't until this year. Perhaps that says that local culture can be preserved through sheer inertia. I started out as an American, reading mostly Western literature and listening to Western radio, and that was pretty satisfying for a long time. But then I started to go out to find new things. The real distance to travel was in my life, in my brain, in how I thought of things, in who and/or what I was over time. That's something that external forces don't automatically get rid of, and which enable me to have a somewhat "local" identity as well as a "Internet" identity.

Maybe it is possible to maintain both, both a local self and a cosmopolitan self, and to support both kinds of culture, and this is a somewhat adequate compromise between globalism and the opposite of globalism.

Does the local self inform the cosmopolitan self, and vice versa? Maybe what is most important from each must be expressed in the other. An image for how to organize unity-in-diversity is to have an essential self, or an essential culture, which needs to be exactly how it is for more or less life-and-death reasons, and which probably could be relatively simple, and then a diversity of personalities, cultures, selves, etc. which are not essential to the same degree. At all times, you should strive to be your essential self (perhaps), though you clothe yourself with different non-essential selves at different moments. And all people at all times should have within their essential selves a component which is universal, the same as everyone else, which means they share a certain essential culture, despite whatever non-essential differences they have.

One challenge here is to actually retain that essential self at all times, rather than splitting into an essential time and one or more non-essential times. This is one way of looking at integrity.

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p. 112

Cowen discusses the phenomenon of consumers of culture facing the selection from producers. If the consumers have more refined taste, they choose the best from the producers, creating competitive pressure on all of them to be of higher taste. But, any one consumer of culture has (according to Cowen), effectively zero ability to sway a producer to have higher taste: --If I improve my taste in food, the local Chinese restaurant does not respond with a better product. The chef does not care what I think, given that I comprise a very small part of his market.-- Therefore it might not be worth me improving my taste: --In addition to the time and

energy I would have invested, I may simply end up frustrated by my new and higher standards for food. Yet if we could *all* improve our taste in Chinese food, and learn to discern the better product, the chef would be compelled to upgrade his offerings, to the benefit of customers more generally.--

Maybe we could look at the state of the world as something which is made the way it is by "producers", and we are "consumers" who can choose what standards of the world we will push for. Should we develop choosier tastes in "a good world"? Then, like Cowen in the Chinese restaurant example, we may be disappointed, in a desert of "not so good" states of the world. We can be happier if we keep ourselves from refining our taste in how good the world is.

What does it take to defect from this [or, maybe, break free from this equilibrium despite its personal costliness], and thus move the world toward a more "tasteful" version of itself? Perhaps believing in God, we maintain a stricter taste in the world, since he is always someone we can share that taste with. Or we can reflect on the fact that the "arc of progress bends toward a more 'tasteful' world", and that this higher taste is something morally required of each person in the end so that they do not die the second death. These two thoughts put a thumb on the scale of a person, causing them to be willing to desire the "Chinese restaurant" that is best, though hard or even impossible to find, or for the "Chinese restaurants" of the world to offer better "food" at some cost. Perhaps one can learn to love "cuisine" because God loves it.

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Finished Chapter 5.

I feel like there is probably more in that chapter for someone other than my present self to find.

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Starting Chapter 6.

This chapter looks like it will be most relevant to the questions I asked in the preview.

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Why is cultural homogenization a good thing? According to p. 128, while --Germany and France are more alike today--, --[o]nly in a world of globalized culture can I collect nineteenth-century Japanese prints, listen to the music of Pygmy tribes, read the Trinidadian author V. S. Naipaul, and enjoy the humor of Canadian Jim Carrey, while my neighbors pursue different paths of their own choosing.-- In other words, while cultures have homogenized, this has created more freedom and diversity within cultures.

I imagine Cowen (or a Cowenian-type person) sitting in his living room, reflecting on all the different cultural treasures available to him, and an equally Cowenian neighbor, laughing at the comedy of Nollywood movies, reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez, listening to French coldwave, and collecting high-quality prints of Russian icons. But then, we could imagine a different kind of person, a more or less non-Cowenian person. This person is deeply connected to their families, to the people alive and dead. They only have one perspective, and therefore their moral emotions are more intense. When someone is in need of help, they will act to help, not considering the bigger picture so much that they don't help at all. If we take the Old Testament as a possibly idealized memory, in some respects, of this kind of person, then the ideal calls us to weep for our wayward sons, to make irrevocable vows, to listen to a god who wants us to bless the whole world, and to long to have children of our own.

[The Old Testament is an ambivalent book and cautions us not to make rash vows -- but at least it presents the kind of person who even want to make irrevocable vows.]

Is it likely that this kind of person can exist, can be a neighbor of Cowen? Or are they (or people like them, who perhaps aren't as literally Old Testament) dying out as globalization comes? To be fair, Cowen intentionally limits his argument to avoid this. This is a valid move for an author to make, as a professional. But Cowen himself (or people who like Cowen's ideas) are citizens or amateurs, that is, people who have to live in reality, whatever it actually is. I think for the purposes of my writing, it's fine that I talk about the amateur reality rather than professional one that Cowen chooses, although I acknowledge that as a professional he has written the book he has "legally", as it were.

The critics of Cowen (the ones he's addressing "off-stage" in his book, that he's thinking about), do not want the world to be Cowenian, in some sense. I've presented in the previous paragraphs one possible non-Cowenian person. The critics may not want to resurrect an ancient, agrarian, pastoralist, way of looking at the world, or a way of looking at things that is too adjacent to that way of looking at the world. But they want something other than what Cowen wants. They don't want to sit in a living room with their prints, music, novels, and movies, or their personal equivalents. Or, perhaps they do, but recognize that there is something -- perhaps a depth of emotion, or a connection to something outside of pain and pleasure, or experiences-as-experiences, which calls for intense loyalty, an external *reality* -- which is lost if we take on the cosmopolitan way of seeing things. Maybe non-cosmopolitan people really love, and wise and experienced people only will and experience a fake or paltry love. We have lost a lot if we have lost the ability to love.

Secular critics of Cowenian-type thinking might not put things in those terms, might not be aware of what I'm talking about, but still sense it, and

then make a bunch of arguments that Cowenians can find flaws with, which are motivated by a more fundamental concern. I think that Cowen is aware of the deeper questions, my evidence being that he explicitly limits himself from them. He can make his case by avoiding (maybe) the thing that is subtext for the arguments that are made. Maybe his purpose is to push the debate onto the more religious or quasi-religious ground?

Defending the family naturally connects to defending the nation. A nation is really just a bizarre elaboration of the family. The political and the familial are related. The economic and the individualist, and/or the mechanistic, are related. To see things in terms of wealth is to see many impersonal things, and to not connect with people. So the economic approach pushes down against families, is (positively) a check against bad politics and bad families but (negatively) could go on to destroy family. Natural culture is on a spectrum which also includes extended and immediate family. So desire to protect the many families of the world from globalization may be a desire to protect the familial, a foundation for what it means to be human -- or, a full-fledged personal being.

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Is it possible to unify the Old Testament sensibility with the truth, given that the truth is complex? The truth leans in a cosmopolitan direction.

Also, what is it that really matters? It is possible that to truly love means that we must love with emotional depth and intensity that is rarely seen in polite Western society. Maybe this is required for salvation, because we don't know how to love like God otherwise, and thus are not in tune with him. Maybe we are limited in what emotions we can feel or express, either by temperament or by culture. But there should perhaps be a pressure on culture to make it more Old Testament (as I've used "Old Testament" in these notes), and individuals need to come, in who they are, to desire that emotion, even if some may be basically incapable of it in what they are.

That's an argument for why that kind of love is necessary, but family (human families) is somewhat less directly connected to that love, in other words human families are not absolutely necessary for this love and don't always work in favor of it, and tribal or national culture is even less directly connected.

It's dangerous for "Old Testament" love to be out of the picture culturally, and familial, tribal, and national instincts may be helpful in protecting it, and when relatively costless should be preserved as much as possible. (Maybe that's a guide for people who have to choose between different courses of action, whether to be economic or political, as they influence the way the world works).

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Finished Chapter 6 (and thus the whole book).

My impression of Cowen's response, right after finishing the book (with whatever memory issues that entails), of things I thought he might write about, that I wrote in my preview for this book review:

-Why is cultural homogenization a good thing? (I.e., why is it good for different cultures to become more similar to each other?)

Cultural differences can be good for creativity, but individual diversity outweighs that loss.

-Is homogenization going to go as far as anti-globalization people fear?

From the last three or four pages, it seems like Cowen expects cultural differences to last for a long time. But, I'm not sure what he would say about cultural change over "longtermist" timescales.

-Is artistic innovation going to never end, despite globalization?

I think Cowen thinks that some artistic innovation relies at least to some extent on non-cosmopolitanism. So the lifespan of art as an innovative process is hindered by excessive cosmopolitanism / globalization. I don't know what he would say whether art was something that is "mined" or is more or less infinite.

-Will economic growth outweigh whatever cultural losses come from cultural homogenization?

I don't know what Cowen would say to this.

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And here are some more issues that I raised in the preview -- what can I guess Cowen would say to them, now that I've just finished reading the book?

-Might having coherent (unmixed) traditions allow people to go deeper into them?

I don't know what Cowen would say.

-Might belonging to a family (thus an ethnic group) have inherent value?

I don't know what Cowen would say.

-Might traditions that prevent us from being fulfilled in this life help us to learn to long for what is not-here?

My guess is Cowen would think of unfulfilled longings as being a bad thing, at least if he's "wearing his economist hat".

-Might such longings for what is not-here enable us to be especially

blessed when we find an until-now-unknown culture?

I'm not sure what Cowen would think of this.

-Might some cultures be more in tune with true value (holiness, the output to the Long Reflection) than others? (I guess the fear might be that in the short run there is damage done by homogenizing away those cultures, until the new consensus culture can become holy / truly valuable. Or, that we are likely to forget something, some aspect of holiness or value, which can only be seen in a living culture that has a certain kind of integrity which homogenization prevents.)

I'm not sure what Cowen would think of this.

Labels: #book review, #culture, #economics, #futurism, #Tyler Cowen

Book Review: Meaning of Marriage by Timothy Keller (with Kathy Keller)

%book-review-meaning-of-marriage-by

Thursday, September 22, 2022

See also the preview for this review.

Like with the other reviews released around this time, I don't have much to add to this right now other than the notes I wrote.

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[Notes:]

The Meaning of Marriage notes

p. 21

--Marriage is glorious but hard. It's a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat, and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. No marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy tale come true. Therefore it is not surprising that the only phrase in Ephesians 5 that many couples can relate to is verse 32, printed above. Sometimes you fall into bed, after a long, hard day of trying to understand each other, and you can only sigh: "This is all a profound mystery!" At times, your marriage seems to be an unsolvable puzzle, a maze in which you feel lost.--

Keller's description of marriage sounds analogous in some ways to what it's like trying to do something hard for God, hard ministry. (A prophet's role, a missionary's, or perhaps many other roles, although those come to mind as two that are inherently hard, and not just sometimes hard). Certainly hard ministry (pursuing the cross) seems to have the same or higher magnitude of difficulty as what Keller describes of marriage, although the quality of difficulty might be different.

I wonder if, for many people, the most difficult thing they ever do is stay married to someone, and this is because their ministry (or other work) is too easy to be harder than that.

People need some difficulty in their lives, and if you live life on "easy" mode, doing normal, default things, you'll end up in a marriage, which

"tastes" easy as you get into it, but gives you more than you bargained for. If you are weird, then your dedication to something other than a spouse may take the place of a marriage in giving you difficulty. Or perhaps your mental or physical illness, or your bad luck with friendship will give you the difficulty that marriage would have. The desert fathers found in their semi-familial lives the difficulty of living with each other.

In Timothy Ware's *The Orthodox Church*, it says (p. 301 / Sacraments chapter, Marriage section) --The second part of the [Orthodox marriage] service culminates in the ceremony of coronation: on the heads of the bridegroom and bride the priest places crowns, made among the Greeks of leaves and flowers, but among the Russians of silver or gold. This, outward and visible sign of the sacrament, signifies the special grace which the couple receive from the Holy Spirit, before they set out to found a new family or domestic Church. The crowns are crowns of joy, but they are also crowns of martyrdom, since every true marriage involves an immeasurable self-sacrifice on both sides.--

Monasticism could be seen as a flight from the fakeness of dominant-Christian Rome, and from a church that no longer had persecution purifying it. It could be seen as a way to be as true to Jesus as someone being forced to choose between their life and their faith in him. But the Orthodox ceremony says that the death of something, other than physical death (the ego?) is a form of martyrdom.

Is marriage, or monasticism, really the same as being burned at the stake, or being forced to choose whether to be burned or to recant?

Perhaps the intensity is the same, but the quality (I would guess), is not. The monks emphasized more of the physical self-risking, and spiritual self-risking (exposing themselves to demonic attack), but they didn't bring themselves to exactly the same point as the (literal) martyrs, of facing life and death and thus having to have faith that either something was better than life, or that there was a better world than this life, or both. Likewise, in a marriage, no matter how hard things are, what you experience is generally going to be stress and ego-death, and not a facing of physical death.

Martyrdom is a very egotistical act, in a way. You say "I scorn the claims of life on me, and thus claim that I know better than ordinary people who, as simple humans, are afraid of death". Whatever humility leads you to the cross, you made a decision to set yourself apart from the political and/or social order, a decision which with respect to them is galvanizingly arrogant. Perhaps monasticism preserves much of this seeming arrogance, and this self-assertion against the default. But marriage, not so much. That is, if marriage is the default for most adults, and an eminently human thing, then it is less of a stick-in-the-eye to the social order, and if the martyrdom of marriage is ego-death (which is my first guess as to how it is

a form of death), then it is about making people humble. Humble, but attached to this life, still, perhaps.

Martyrdom serves multiple purposes, one of which is to defy the political and social order, basically just in that they are the political and social order, and fail to be 100% in tune with God. Another is to set people apart from this life, by enabling them to decisively affirm their faith in God apart from the claims of biological self-preservation, their valuing of doing what is right over all else including their own existence, and/or their trust in God to provide a life other than this life, that God exists and will do this.

Monasticism partially satisfies these, but marriage less so. What the two have in common with literal martyrdom is stress, difficulty, and maybe other things.

Because monasticism and marriage don't provide what martyrdom provides (not exactly), they don't (or at least shouldn't) produce the same results in people. So a church that uses monasticism, and, especially, marriage as substitutes or whatever literal martyrdom provided the early church, will be biased a certain way, and will probably lack some of the strength of the early church, because of that bias.

Thinking less diagnostically and more pragmatically, I think that while real literal martyrdom is hard to come by, and actually dying young is very costly and that cost weighs heavily against experiencing martyrdom, "pursuing the cross" will bias your life in that direction, and perhaps put you in a place where you come closer to making the martyr's choice, in the course of being as effective as you can in serving God. In a world where there is no opportunity for literal martyrdom, if such a world exists, we can lament that it is gone and that we are cut off from its access to the moral and metaphysical truth.

Maybe facing literal martyrdom is required of all of us, and will be something we experience in the Millennium if we have not in this life. If God is the good, then to place him first is required. So then, we must be willing to forsake everything for him, including our physical lives (any life at all, for that matter). Perhaps some people can come to that point of forsaking without an experience of literal martyrdom. Maybe they don't have to go through with it. But to go through with it finishes the decision-making process for those who weren't completely sure they wanted to put God first.

Ego-death does help a person forsake things in order to put God first, so it helps in this "crucial" task. But it doesn't substitute for the cross.

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--Nothing can mature character like marriage.--

How literally does Keller mean this? The immediately preceding sentences: --Studies show that spouses hold one another to greater levels of personal responsibility and self-discipline than friends or other family members can. Just to give one example, single people can spend money unwisely and self-indulgently without anyone to hold them accountable. But married people make each other practice saving, investment, and delayed gratification.--

Does Keller think of "character" in terms of "functional behavior"? Or does he mean it in a broader sense, that includes whether someone is true to God? In this context, the former is a better reading than the latter. But, the latter is an interesting possibility. If it's true that marriage is the best way to build character, then perhaps for many people, the only way to overcome their sinful habits is through marriage. Overcoming your sinful habits is behavioral, but it is linked to whether you are against sin and for God in your heart. Maybe the best way to choose to not behave the wrong way is through being married, and the unmarried are unable to access it.

For Keller, this might not sound like too big a deal, because (I assume) as a Calvinist, he thinks character is not what saves a person from hell. Character is like a very nice thing that we all like and should consider important and our duty to pursue, but ultimately, it has nothing to do with whether we spend eternity with God. But as a New Wine Christian, I am concerned about whether or not people can become completely saved without being married.

I think that if the Bible is authoritative, then it would be weird if marriage was required to complete the process of becoming holy, because in the Resurrection (in the Millennium), there is no marriage or giving in marriage. This life lasts a few decades for us, and if we take Revelation literally, the Millennium lasts 1,000 years. So it would be weird to expect God to only give us this amazing way to become mature, only to some, and only for a few decades. There is probably some other way to mature, which is sufficiently effective.

p. 36

Keller talks about the possibility that young adults are afraid of marriage. --Tierney believes, at least among his New York friends, that there are even more people in this category. Those dreaming of the perfect match are outnumbered by those who don't really want it at all, though perhaps they can't admit it. After all, our culture makes individual freedom, autonomy, and fulfillment the very highest values, and thoughtful people know deep down that any love relationship at all means the loss of all three.--

I think it's reasonable to be afraid of being abused, and individual

freedom, autonomy, and fulfillment are things which abusers deny us. To make a god out of freedom, autonomy, and fulfillment is obviously dangerous, but to be controlled by a Satanic torturer and imprisoner (perhaps in extreme cases, a dark human being, or in less extreme cases, a dark relationship dynamic) is not something that God wants us to go through. From a biblical perspective, he led his people out of slavery. And, a bad marriage can be slavery, inhibiting a person's ability to follow God.

For all that Keller talks up marriage as a good thing, I wonder if he will address the possibility of how marriage partners and/or relationship dynamics can be abusive / Satanic, using the institution of marriage.

Does Keller think that the average person need not worry about Satanic relationships? I would guess that many young people have experienced these, whether friends or friendships, romantic partners or relationships, people at work or work environments, similarly with religion and family of origin, and don't feel confident that they can handle those situations. A marriage is a situation which is supposedly "for life", potentially a life sentence to being with a moral monster. Perhaps wise young people (helped by wise older people, perhaps) can tell where the really abusive people are and avoid them. And if you have a sense of flourishing and personal strength, you can face the possibilities of a marriage to someone who can't be considered an obvious abuser evolving into something hellish. But young people have to grow or be strengthened to be able to have the confidence to face the experience which helps them grow and be strengthened to deal with these possibilities. Maybe people delay marriage because it takes many years to develop these capacities of reading people and effectively taking control of relationships so that they do not become Satanic.

"Satanic" is a strong word, and maybe given the way it's loaded, it's the wrong one to use. But I think that it's normal for Satan to deceive us and tempt us, and not unlikely for him to blatantly oppress and torment us. Perhaps Keller's intended audience are people who aren't experiencing the worst of Satanic attack, but only "50% Satanic" situations or "25%" or "10%". There's a spectrum of nightmare, and if you're stuck with a nightmare for years and years, you might quit that job or get a divorce, burned out from the nightmare.

Who would want to get married, if they were afraid of these things? The person you love (do you really love them? or are you faking it? how do you know?) is the person who will turn out to be a monster to you, and you will be a monster to them, and one or both of you won't be able to take it, and you'll have to break the contract, betraying your wedding day and your past selves who got married, and likely betraying someone in the present, whom you still love on some level, or at least are viscerally bound to -- breaking up is bad enough, but divorce is even worse. It may be true that marriage is not always this grim, but there is a decent chance of this

happening to you, and do you have a solid reason to think you're in the set of people who make it through to whatever "glorious, hard-fought joy" Keller promises? Do you want to take this horrible risk? Or maybe you would prefer to wait to see how well you can take it when you're a little older.

I'm caught between different intuitions here. My sympathies for civilization say "long-delayed marriage is bad for fertility rates". My sympathies for being a young person, and for personal risk-aversion, say "marriage and romance are not necessarily worth it for everyone". My sense of what is deep down most important spiritually says "No one has to get married, this is not necessary for salvation, don't get too caught up in this life". I guess to avoid the danger of depopulation, I would say "if you want to have a lot of kids, go ahead -- this allows some people to never have kids". I don't see there being any real benefit to not building up young people to deal with Satanic influences, so, however that can be done, that should allow people to develop the confidence to take on marriage.

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p. 36, further down

Keller quotes C. S. Lewis to the effect that you could lose your salvation if you don't open your heart to someone. Keller says, right before the quote: --But if you avoid marriage simply because you don't want to lose your freedom, that is one of the worst things you can do to your heart. C. S. Lewis put it vividly:[...]--

Giving up your freedom to God is one thing, and giving it up to the institution of marriage, or to a marriage, or perhaps a marriage partner, are different things. Giving up your freedom to God should never shame you or oppress you, and it isn't God at work if you feel some pressure to give up freedom to God that does that. But, any human relationship or institution can abuse you and none of them are worthy of your allegiance, except in a way derivative of God's legitimate claim on you. So Lewis has a point, if what we are really urging is that people love God. But if we use the idea that a closed heart leads to hell to say "so you should get married even if you don't quite feel like it, have reservations/excuses against it" is a subtly dangerous one. There are different instruments for becoming holy, but they are not God, and when we urge them on people as though they are necessary for salvation, we can deceive ourselves and others into thinking that they are the things that save us, rather than it being God who saves us, and that they are the things we need to love and trust, when it is really God whom we *must* love and trust.

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p. 45 --In short, the "secret" is not simply the fact of marriage per se. It is

the message that what husbands should do for their wives is what Jesus did to bring us into union with himself. And what was that?

Jesus *gave himself up* for us.--

I like that Keller makes this point. I think that if I were a husband, I would chafe at the thought of my wife nagging me until I "changed" so that I could be a responsible grown-up adult and she could be happy with me for once. That sounds terrible, like being stuck in a fishbowl with another fish who is stuck in the same fishbowl for 40 years. But, if I am Jesus Christ in the fishbowl, and the other fish is Jesus Christ, too, then the fishbowl is fine. To be Jesus is not petty, but to be nagged is petty. A man can aspire to greatness by being Jesus, but not to bowing to pettiness. Even if the self-sacrifice is externally the same, like the man makes the same adjustments to his wife's desires, there is a difference of identity. I gender-type this, but I suppose men can be petty in their own ways and women can be imposed upon in petty ways through men.

I wonder how much of Keller's book would be necessary for young adults who had learned to become like Jesus. I don't mean in the sense of being 100% morally pure, but just having set their aspirations for who to be higher than merely a "Christian", "spouse", "employee", "parent", "regular person in modern society", or whatever, but higher, to "Jesus, the son of God". Not Jesus as "moral paragon" but as "a specific person with his ways of relating to people and God and his own personality, who is a moral paragon". And then to have significantly walked in that aspiration, having received Jesus' spirit. And, as Christians, why are we trying to invest in institutions like marriage, when we should first invest in following our master (that is, becoming like him), which would solve many of our problems with institutions (and with living life in general)?

Maybe my mention of "greatness" above will seem prideful, or connected to pride. I think that children of God should be aware of the danger of pride, and the danger of the word "great", since it has connotations that connect to pride, but also should aspire to greatness, in the sense that we are the children of God, generally the adult children of God, and there is a kind of highbornness to us because of that.

[I'm not sure I like that word "highbornness". Jesus wasn't "great" in the way that Napoleon was great, not exactly. But he wasn't "ungreat" either. He wasn't a "small" person, but some kind of "large" person. As we follow Jesus, we become like him, and become his kind of "large" people.]

Satan wants us to think small, so that we don't dare to fight him. While we are sometimes "our own worst enemies", our real enemy is Satan, and not ourselves. So pride is dangerous, and many attempts to avoid or suppress pride are also dangerous.

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p. 48 --Marriage is a major vehicle for the gospel's remaking of your heart from the inside out and your life from the ground up.--

Keller allows that there might be other ways with this statement.

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p. 48 Somewhat incidental to this review, I come upon Keller's signature definition of the Gospel, as I read this book. Here it is: --The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.--

What would I say the gospel is? I could say "what it is according to the New Wine System", but I can't claim to speak for everyone who believes it -- notably, maybe Philip Brown, the developer of it, would disagree with my wording. So I will say, what is the gospel from an MSLN perspective (notably, including the Bible as well as MSL, as can be the case with MSLN). I would say something like: "You are not 100% in tune with God, or at least that's very unlikely and you can't know that you are. You have to be 100% in tune with God someday. And, if you really want to be, you will be. You have a long way to go to being 100% holy, to fully repenting, and you can make it as long as you don't give up. God will help you. If you, in some sense, live the life and death of Jesus, you will make it. There is enough time for you to live that life, but don't take your salvation for granted."

Would people take that as good news? Maybe some would. I did, when I first understood it.

Keller goes on immediately following to say: --This is the only kind of relationship that will really transform us. Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God's saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us. The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourselves and repent. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God's mercy and grace.--

Is it true that Keller's gospel is the only kind of relationship that will really transform us? I can see it kind of like, "Truth gives us information about how to change ourselves, and you need to not have a block to it. Feeling like you are not loved can make you resist the truth. So you need to not feel like you are not loved. Thus, we need to convince people who are afraid that they are not loved or are not lovable, that in fact there is no possible way that God cannot love them, because he loves unconditionally." That is probably a somewhat unfaithful rendition of Keller's thinking, but it's a way to import it into my own.

For me, truth comes first and in the end can't be adulterated at all. It's true that God loves you and always will, except if you pledge yourself to being his enemy irrevocably. He will mourn you, then, for all time, after you are destroyed for not being someone he can live with. But there is a sense in which God does not love you unconditionally. He can't, if you are the irrevocable enemy of legitimacy, which is him.

This last paragraph is a terrifying thing, or it could be, to some. Perhaps it is useful to God to say "look, for our purposes, just between you and me, as your pastor / teacher, I'm going to tell you something that isn't literally true, through my servant Tim Keller, which is that I love you literally 100% unconditionally, and this will really help you develop and it will be more effective than telling you the harsh or frightening truth of your ability to turn away from me. Someday you're going to have to face that, but not yet."

If you find that idea unsatisfying, then I could use Philip Brown's saying that things can generally be true even if there are exceptions. God loves everyone, generally. But you might be uncertain whether you fit in the category of those whom God will always love. And to be fair, we all should question that, but also proceed with confidence on the path toward holiness, so as to be more likely to arrive.

If none of that is acceptable, then I guess you can just not believe what I say, and you'll do relatively well with some "relaxation" of the truth, like, perhaps, Keller's gospel. But, if I know the truth, I feel a responsibility to say it -- maybe I could be wrong about what is true, could believe something falsely, but I still have a responsibility to say that thing, because that's how I am.

I do think it's fair to say that if you have not made yourself an irrevocable enemy of God (and this is something you would know if you had done), then it's true that God still loves you. And God's love is something more intense, but more importantly, more real and true, than any other possible love. So hopefully you have experienced love that has made you feel secure in its trueness, even a little bit, and you can multiply that greatly to imagine God's love. At least hopefully that image is good enough to help you to hear and respond to the truth that you need.

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Finished Chapter 1.

Started ch. 2

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Sidebar: I remember Paul saying that to be single was good because you could focus on pleasing God, while when married you had to focus on

pleasing your spouse. ESV says (1 Corinthians 7:32-34): --I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.--

Would it be possible for a marriage to exist that was "anxious to please the Lord"? Perhaps each spouse, and the union of the two, only exists to further God's interests, and to take care of your spouse is only care for one of God's instruments. Your marriage is only valuable as one of God's instruments.

Do marriages start with "I want to help God take care of his instruments." Or rather with "I'm lonely, hungry, weak and need help" or "I have an appealing feeling in me when I think about So-and-so" or something like that?

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pp. 57 - 58

Keller talks about how if you rely on God to fulfill your emotional needs, then you don't have to rely on your spouse as much, and can be more patient, kind, etc. when they aren't.

This sounds like a basically good way of looking at things to me. However, one potential problem could be that one spouse is not emotionally reliant on the other, or significantly less so, but the other's "everything" is the first spouse. This disparity could create a power dynamic, where the less-reliant person doesn't "need" the more-reliant person, but the more-reliant does "need" the less-reliant (a felt need which psychologically is a need even if strictly speaking each partner could survive without each other). The one who needs more might feel vulnerable, having given themselves over to someone who is not vulnerable to them in return.

I guess one way around this is to make sure both partners are more or less equally secure in themselves (i.e. relying primarily on God for their emotional needs) before marrying. But what if one partner takes the lead in becoming reliant on God after a marriage? I wonder if Keller ever addresses this issue.

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p. 59 --Seek to serve one another rather than to be happy, and you will find a deeper happiness. Many couples have discovered this wonderful, unlooked-for reality. Why would this be true? It is because marriage is "instituted of God." It was established by the God for whom self-giving love

is an essential attribute, and therefore it reflects his nature, particularly as it is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.--

However, I think you can be a self-giving person in orientation and still find yourself harmed by the other person in a relationship. For a toy example, consider a case where a self-giving person gets woken up night after night by an inconsiderate partner. The lack of sleep takes its toll, and even if the self-giving person is not offended, is not impatient, or somehow even not irritable, they will have to say something, and if that doesn't work, leave the relationship. I think it's the same way with God, and this explains why we have to overcome all of our sinful habits, sin being that which is like "nails on a chalkboard" to God.

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pp. 59 - 60 --The word "submit" that Paul uses has its origin in the military, and in Greek it denoted a soldier submitting to an officer. Why? Because when you join the military you lose control over your schedule, over when you can take a holiday, over when you're going to eat, and even over what you eat. To be part of a whole, to become part of a greater unity, you have to surrender your independence.--

You could literally starve to death if you have a bad commanding officer, then. This points to the idea that being part of a whole can sometimes not be worth it.

I feel like my life is largely dictated by something outside my control. It looks like it is in line with God's will, so I tend to assume that it is God. For a person in that situation, is it possible that the normal "become one with your spouse, put yourself second (be flexible)" leading is not reliable? Or maybe it only works if you and your spouse equally obey these dictates from the invisible world. But, perhaps, the dictates only come through you. How can your spouse trust that these really come from God? Again, is there a power dynamic here that is hard to handle?

Is there a way for a marriage to maximize its partners' independence? Or at least to allow for a lot of independence?

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pp. 60 - 62 Keller talks about woundedness, about how when people come to a marriage, they come from somewhere, which can be abusive. So he (I guess) implicitly affirms that relationships can be abusive.

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p. 63 --There is the essence of sin, according to the Bible -- living for ourselves, rather than for God and the people around us. This is why Jesus can sum up the entire law -- the entire will of God for our lives -- in two great commands: to love and live for God rather than ourselves and to love

and put the needs of others ahead of our own (Matthew 22:37-40).--

This sounds odd to me. Doesn't the Bible say to "love others as yourself"? It doesn't exactly sound altruistic, but rather as though you are one with the other person. Both your needs and theirs are yours. (Well, "love your neighbor as yourself" is ambiguous in English, maybe also in Greek and Hebrew, and has been interpreted in different ways by different people).

Matthew 22:37-40 says (ESV): --And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."-- Maybe my objection ends up being academic (Keller never really wants the reader to not care for themselves, nor to always place others' well-being over their own in every circumstance), but it seems like something he could be missing, given what he wrote right there.

If it is the case that we are commanded to love "our neighbor" as ourselves, and this means to love them as though they are part of us, and "neighbor" includes anyone we come in contact with, then there's something like marriage that we enter into (or should?) with all kinds of people. A marriage (the romantic kind) is a bit less special if a major component of it is something we should extend to everyone (and an overemphasis on marriage or "on *our* marriage" with all of its intense and worked-for love could take away from the "mini-marriages" we're called to have with each person).

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Finished ch. 2

Is self the enemy, or is Satan the enemy? Is Satan just another word for self? (No, there are supernatural evil beings who are our enemies, or perhaps one chief among them, named Satan.) Is it possible for self-centeredness to be a problem? Yes, that makes sense. A person could do wrong. But they could also be deceived by Satan. Maybe someone else has written a book about "The Deceiver Versus Your Marriage" and how to avoid believing lies about your spouse, yourself, and your marriage. Maybe Keller, with his Calvinist background, is biased away from the supernatural, out of a kind of cessationism? (I seem to remember that Calvinists tend to be cessationists.)

A lot of relationship difficulties come from seeing a human as your enemy. You might move away from seeing your spouse as your enemy by seeing yourself as your enemy. But then there might be collateral damage to seeing yourself as the enemy. For instance, you get in the habit of not being critical ("who am I to judge?") and this keeps you away from being perceptive and ambitious in changing the status quo for the better. But,

neither you nor your spouse may be the enemy, rather, the Enemy may be your enemy.

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pp. 98 - 100

Keller talks about how some people think that helping people out of duty, without affection, is inauthentic, but he thinks that if you can't help people out of duty, you "cripple your ability to maintain and grow strong love relationships" (p. 100).

I think that there are dangers to doing things out of duty, without affection. If your emotions are contrary to your actions, you will have to pay a cost. It can be depleting. Once depleted, you "crash out" of the relationship, or become resentful. Or you simply lose interest, like Tom Bombadil with the Ring -- you're not the right kind of person to be entrusted with that relationship. People have good reason to be concerned when people help them contrary to the helper's feelings or lack of feelings.

This doesn't take away from Keller's point, but just says that there are dangers both ways, and reasons why people should sometimes not trust people who "inauthentically" help despite their feelings or lack of feelings.

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Through page 105.

Keller mentions that people can act lovingly, and this can produce feelings of love. So maybe he would say "A danger of being emotionally depleted by feelingless acted love, which leads to burnout and abandonment or some other failure to relate properly? Nonsense." I do appreciate that people manage to be more or less successfully married for a long time and they all have to practice this "act before feeling" thing, and very often it leads to "feelings", but I wonder if there is some kind of survivorship bias, where Keller does know what it takes to produce successful marriages, when success is possible, but gives advice that won't work for everyone. He is a cheerleader for marriage, and it's true that on the whole, marriage is a good thing for society and those who "succeed" at it. But is there any way to get rid of the risk of some people getting trapped in situations where they get burned out emotionally while trying to be married? (Or as mentioned before, get trapped in a really abusive relationship, or one with a really abusive partner?)

I have been the kind of person who is unable to pay the emotional cost of being in abusive and/or sterile relationships. Not that I am unwilling to be in such relationships, but that my body gives out and I have to leave, and seemingly can never go back. Maybe I'm just not cut out to be married? Or I would be at high risk of either divorce or going crazy? Maybe this

"marriage" thing as Keller presents it makes more sense for "normal" people, healthy and with "healthy" egos. But mentally ill people are a different class?

Mental illness affects many people, but not the majority (I should check this, but a statistic I remember is, 20% of some population (US?) is mentally ill.)

Maybe there are books like "Marriage for Schizophrenics" or "Marriage for Bipolar People" -- sounds like such things should exist by now. Is there a thoughtful Christian version of them?

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p. 107 --We tend to size up potential partners as to their assets and deficits.--

This makes a lot of sense if we are exhausted and don't have the energy to pull other people's weight. Maybe God gives us the energy to not be exhausted? I think sometimes he does. But sometimes he doesn't and we are just not high-energy people.

A pastor concerned about marriage in his or her church might try to find ways to deal with people's exhaustion.

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Finished ch. 3

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p. 110 - 111 --How could Adam be in a "not good" condition when he was in a perfect world and had, evidently, a perfect relationship with God?--

This in reference to Adam, whose aloneness was said to be "not good" by God in Genesis 2:18).

The MSLN perspective on this is that Adam and God did not have a perfect relationship. Adam had not fully matured to be in tune with God's heart, so while he may have felt good about God, God had painfully mixed feelings about him, and this was not something that God could sustain forever, so something had to change. Based on that, I could go on to speculate that perhaps humans tend to have an inborn difficulty in relating to God, which spiritual maturity ameliorates. So, when we are immature, we need people to perform the roles that God does -- often, God works directly through them as puppets or pawns, but we can trust those faces rather than God's. Therefore Adam needed another human, I guess, a wife.

Keller goes on to say that humans are made for relationship because they are images of the triune God, who always interrelates. But why get married? What about celibate people? Maybe celibate people need other

humans? What about hermits? It seems like humans can be satisfied with their "vertical" relationship with God, despite what Keller says (p. 111): -- The Genesis narrative is implying that our intense relational capacity, created and given to us by God, was not fulfilled completely by our "vertical" relationship with him. God designed us to need "horizontal" relationships with other human beings.--

The clearest case of humans needing "horizontal" relationships is with small children. So maybe they are necessary when we are immature, and this is by God's design. But it's unfortunate that we can't relate to God directly when we are young, sufficient to not feel like, or really, need the people around us, who can become competitors to God in our hearts, or abuse us.

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p. 120

Keller says that the purpose of marriage is to help the spouses become their "future glory-selves". This makes a lot of sense from a MSLN perspective, and perhaps we could extend this mission to everything in life. (Brushing your teeth helps you overcome your sinful habits and love God with everything? Maybe -- it's easier to see the mission of holiness in "bigger" things, like friendship, marriage, political structures, education, and so on). I don't know how Keller can make sense of holiness without either God zapping us to become holy (which is impossible on the level of us repenting) or there being time to finish the process after this life. If he thinks us becoming holy is unnecessary for salvation, then probably whatever is necessary for salvation should take its place for the purpose of marriage -- perhaps, helping spouses be more effective evangelists, or keeping each other from falling away, should take precedence.

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How should spiritual friendship work in MSLN? I don't really know, and I think this is an area where people should adopt the truth of MSLN, think it through themselves, and try to apply those truths in their lives. Maybe if enough people are into MSLN, some sense of what works and what doesn't over many different relationships will emerge. Naively, I don't see why Keller's approach, which is something like (paraphrased from p. 122) "be a fan of how your spouse [or you could apply this to non-spouses] is developing a morally beautiful personality through God's work, and accept them for their flaws" is bad, although the tone with which he writes about it does not reflect the sense of sobriety I would feel (or ought to feel), contemplating the possibility of people turning against God someday (of myself turning against God someday), despite how we are making progress currently.

But maybe I would approach the problem from a different angle and come

up with something somewhat different.

If you have a religion that teaches holiness as a life or death thing that is every person's responsibility, then naturally it is tempting for any church built around that to want to control its members so that they are holy. Moral urgency is a temptation to control. Good behavior is valuable, and people should use self-control to "fake it" (to "act before feeling") sometimes. An emphasis on self-control naturally leads to a group that tries to control its members. Serious religion tends to be controlling religion. The more a group wants to be socially enmeshed, the more dangerous seriousness becomes (by this logic, at least). So, perhaps, the way to be serious, to increase seriousness, is to have "libertarian holiness", where a norm of interpersonal libertarianism is enforced. People leave other people in the hands of God, and urge each other to develop "thick" relationships with God, as their relationships with humans "thin" out somewhat. They attempt to respect each other and not do things that will enable Satan to enter into each other's minds (through disrespect, temptation, etc.) They try to be true to God themselves, and by doing so anti-tempt each other, validate each other's love of God.

At the same time, the more serious, the higher the gap between what is socially/officially aspired to, and what many individuals can attain, and thus a greater potential for vulnerability to shame. Thin interpersonal bonds are not always good for keeping people from shame, but redirecting people toward relating to God (who does not shame -- whatever you experience that shames you is not from God), helps with this. People should not feel that they are socially obligated to pursue holiness, they only do so out of love of God, or perhaps because they feel that it in itself saves them from hell -- something they would care about if they were not part of a group that was into it. I think MSLN erases inequality on many levels because no one is really safe -- the people who seem great may actually have lost their "velocity" or have begun to harden over some tiny sin, and the "apparent moral failure" in behavioral terms may have a more trustworthy "velocity".

This is a quick sketch, and as far as I'm able to do right now -- very provisional.

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Another image of marriage and friendship: two people are committed to relating to God first, and second to working for him. They are held in common by having the same God, and on some level the same work (maybe this works best if they work on the same long-term project or on the same team). Their commitment to the same God reassures them that they will be friends, and so does their commitment to the same work, as it is said that the commitment between two spouses reassures their children.

This seems like a way for monk-like people to become friends, or to have a substitute for a spouse. It could (maybe?) be a model for spiritual friendship within a marriage.

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pp. 139 - 140

Keller likens marriage to a heavy truck that reveals a bridge's flaws. Then he talks about how when he had thyroid cancer, he was glad the doctor found the tiny lump rather than wishing he hadn't to spare him the trouble of the treatment. p. 140: --That was because the consequences of being "spared all the trouble" would have been, in the end, far more deadly, far more trouble, than finding and treating the cancer while it was small and confined.--

This makes a fair amount of sense from a New Wine (or at least MSLN) perspective -- you risk being destroyed in hell by your sinful habits. But I assume Keller is not a New Wine believer, so why does he think not dealing with character flaws matters? Does he believe it will hurt in the Resurrection for "oblivious, abrasive, independent" people (three of the traits he singles out on p. 138 as things marriage will force you to confront), but that these people will go to heaven anyway? So that means you don't have to do anything about those traits, if you're willing to take your punishment and get through whatever God wants to do to you. You are not required to repent, only to endure.

Is marriage something that is really good in weeding out the little things? When you're stuck with someone, the petty things can come out. Tiny sins are dangerous. Is it better to take out all the tiny sins, or focus more on developing something big, a love of God? I think that the comparative advantage of marriage may be (may sound like, given what I've read in this book far) be an institution that forces you to deal with whatever small sins come out in behavior. But it comes at the cost of forcing you to attend to another human being, possibly (likely) in competition with attending to God. The comparative advantage of celibacy is that it leaves you alone with God more rigorously, and can help you develop a closer reliance on God and love of God. So both celibacy and marriage are dangerous, for different reasons, celibacy by leaving you with your petty character flaws, and marriage by keeping you from fully giving your heart, soul, mind, and strength to God. It's not that marriage has to do this, or celibacy has to keep you from overcoming your petty sins. Keller makes it sound like you should get married so that you can deal with your petty sins, lest you be left "unbeautiful" or whatever he thinks is your bad fate for being sinful. But celibate people are not kept out of the kingdom of heaven, or else Jesus and Paul wouldn't have recommended celibacy. Likewise married people can put God first. But the two life paths are biased the way they are biased.

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Somehow Keller's presentation of marriage in this chapter so far reminds me of Sartre's *No Exit*. I think part of it is the idea of being locked in a room with nothing to do except *relate*. The marriage becoming its own separate universe. Ordinarily, I would tell someone who was stuck in a terrible petty inner world to go find something useful to do. Do marriages do anything useful? Or, since they are entered into to seek personal happiness for the spouses, do they then have to become a personal hell to punish them for that egocentrism and love of ease? That kind of sounds like what Keller's talking about. And Keller seems to think that's fine, part of the process, part of what's so great about marriage. But I wonder, could it be better for married partners to look together outside their marriages? A marriage is a terrible place to confine married people -- this is why divorce and adultery are appealing. But maybe married people can escape being married without any divorce or adultery, but instead by having something more important than them to focus on.

Civilization is increasingly making human labor superfluous. We will (perhaps) solve our problems. Then what? Just the little problems will remain. We will live petty lives, petty sniping, winning petty victories over our flaws. We will perfect prosociality, since the feedback we have to pay attention to will be other humans. The Bible will only exist insofar as it's applied by other humans according to human agendas.

But there is another dimension to life, the "non-petty" one. What would it take to literally die on a cross for the sins of the world? That is what is expected of disciples of Jesus. Can we access that if there's nothing left to do?

[Die on a cross? I think risking your life is more realistic, not necessarily losing it. But there's something in literal death as the thing required, even if we only risk it, that is not there if it's only "dying to self".]

I feel like Keller's program of marriage could turn out very well-rounded, socially acceptable, beautiful people who fail to be able to literally get nailed to a cross and die in anguish, or anything of the same intensity and level of self-giving, commitment, and thinking big. Can a person be saved without losing their life? What kind of spouse would care about such petty things as "obliviousness, independence", or even "abrasiveness" if they had gone through the cross themselves? Two people who have gone through the cross don't need to pick fights with each other. The edge is taken off the sting of their bad habits (whatever practical consequences may still follow).

[I think that obliviousness, independence, and abrasiveness are the sorts of things I wouldn't be worried about in a spouse, but there are things, really evil spirits, that come over people, or which they choose in a childish way,

which are worth worrying about and responding to. These things are small, but not petty at all. In Nietzschean terms (putting it in a slogan form): what is evil is beyond good and bad. So a tiny drop of evil is not trifling.]

I guess the awful truth is that we withhold the cross from young people, or even middle-aged people. So they (we) hold onto our fear of death and our lack of commitment to God, and our fruitless taste for happiness apart from God. So then we have to go to hell in our marriages. Marriage doesn't need to be hell, but perhaps it's all we have left in a safe environment, to make us suffer and die -- yet I think that the suffering and dying in a petty marriage might not even really be the same as going to the cross, because to become like Jesus in his life and death is to not be petty, and ego-death (what petty personality reconstruction can offer) and physical death are not the same thing.

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From an MSLN perspective, one thing to remember in a petty-hell marriage is that as much as you might feel like your partner is your enemy and is the seat of their flaws, and as appealing as it may seem to take responsibility for your flaws when confronted for them, you have to be careful not to take responsibility for things you never chose to have in the first place. And, to remember that Satan is your real enemy, and slanders people. What you have not consciously chosen is not you, and the same goes for your spouse. People are possessed by spirits and tormented by demons. While it is possible for a person to choose to be bad, often bad behavior is not intended.

What are some ways that Satan can benefit from the ways marriage can go? A divorce is a good outcome from his perspective. Adultery is good. Also, getting people to stop loving God and to accept a small-minded view of themselves and life, so that they don't try to change things, they lose their passion, is also a good outcome from his perspective. That way they won't fight him. For people to deeply feel in their bones that *they* are the problem is a good outcome from Satan's perspective. These aren't really in your best interest, or in your spouse's.

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What is the New Wine System about? It's about overcoming your sinful habits. But, it's also about overcoming *all* of your sinful habits. Which is a better predictor of 100% compliance with God, where you are, or where you are headed? Where you are headed, and, that which keeps you headed that way. Does the process of dealing with the annoying flaws and sins of a spouse give them a good "velocity" or "acceleration" (an inborn tendency to move toward God) or does it just move their position one sanded-down flaw or sin at a time? I could see a "Kellerian" marriage going either way.

Maybe worked into the process of dealing with sins and flaws is something that is radically theistic, like praying for God to help with the flaws. Do those prayers really lead you to a passionate love of God, and a loyalty to God above all competitors? I suppose they could.

A lack of love for God is as dangerous as the presence of sin. The New Wine System says that there is time for overcoming sinful habits. While that time shouldn't be taken for granted, it's more important to develop the love of God that motivates people to repent, and which is needed in itself, rather than to reshape behavior.

Another New Wine / MSLN note: people's behavior can be driven by their brains, which can be replaced by God in the resurrection which begins the Millennium. Brain work might be useful if a person's behavior is a problem, but doesn't need to be the first priority if you're worried about their soul.

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Maybe this is unfair of me to expect of Keller, but I wish that his book had been (so far) more about how to love God, and only incidentally about marriage.

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p. 140 --Marriage by its very nature has the "power of truth" -- the power to show you the truth about who you are.--

I suspect a lot of the time what we think is "who we are" or "who they are" is really more like "what we are" or "what they are". Kellerian marriage could overemphasize "what", claiming it is really "who", and neglect the real "who" issues. I don't think it's good to accept responsibility for problems that don't really come from you -- in some cases that would be to believe Satan.

(Keller may address this on p. 143 when he talks about the distinction between Paul's "I do the things I hate" and "it's not really me doing this, it's sin in me, but rather in my innermost being I delight in the law of God".)

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Now Keller talks about the power of love in marriage. p. 147: --If all the world says you are ugly, but your spouse says you are beautiful, you feel beautiful. To paraphrase a passage of Scripture, your heart may condemn you, but your spouse's opinion is greater than your heart.--

It's unfortunate that we need spouses to do that and can't get it directly from God. Or maybe we can get it directly from God.

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pp. 148 - 149

--As Faramir says to Sam Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, "The praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards." To be highly esteemed by someone you highly esteem is the greatest thing in the world.

This principle explains why, ultimately, to know that the Lord of the universe loves you is the strongest foundation that any human being can have. A growing awareness of God's love in Christ is the greatest reward. And yet we must not forget Adam in the garden. Though he had a perfect relationship with God, his humanity's relational nature was designed also for human love. Your spouse's love for you and Christ's love work together in your life with powerful interaction.--

This seems wrong on different levels. One is, why are we looking for healing and power? That seems to be what Keller is saying is so great about marriage, and God's love in Christ. Shouldn't we rather ought to be looking to love? Why are we so keen on success and being loved? If that's part of our culture (normalized sense that it's right to want success and love), might this explain how we fail as a culture, because we don't seek to love first, before being loved or winning?

Secondly, if you're going to rely on someone (and you should and have to), on whom should you seek to rely? As a celibate person, I think "no, you don't need a spouse's love for you, God is sufficient". It's probably better to rely on God alone as much as you can. Then he becomes a bigger part of your life.

I believe that many beliefsets are both truths and lies (or deceptive truths), in the sense that for one person to believe them, moves that person closer to the overall truth, but for another person to believe them, they move them away from the overall truth. So perhaps Keller's paragraph (or his whole book) is truth for some, but not for everyone.

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pp. 160 - 161

--Praying daily with and for each other is a love language that in many ways brings the other love languages together. It means being tenderly affectionate and transparent with each other. And you hear your spouse lifting you up to God for blessing. If you do that every day, or most days, it seasons your entire relationship with the love of God and of one another.--

I like this, insofar as it's a way for spouses to take a backseat to each other as they relate to God, but to still be present as fellows relating to God.

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p. 166 --How do you get the power of grace? You can't create this power;

you can only reflect it to others if you have received it. If you see Jesus dying on the cross for others, forgiving the people who killed him, that can be just a crushing example of forgiving love that you will never be able to live up to. But if instead you see Jesus dying on the cross for *you*, forgiving you, putting away your sin, that changes everything. He saw your heart to the bottom but loved you to the skies.--

Can't grace just be some kind of spiritual strengthening from God? (This is sort of a Reformed vs. Catholic debate over words.) Then maybe forgiving people on your own cross isn't unattainable at all. Someday you may get to do that yourself. Maybe God wants you to be a moral hero. Do you need to go through the process of receiving forgiveness for your sins in a conscious and emotionally salient way? Or is it fine to just assume that your sins are forgiven, like you assume that there is enough oxygen in the room when you take a breath? Protestantism (esp. some strains that try hard not to be Catholic) problematize or thematize unmerited forgiveness of sins. But from another perspective (somewhat that of existing Christian denominations, maybe, and certainly New Wine / MSLN) forgiveness takes less of a prominent role and what's more important is that you get on the path toward 100% holiness and stay true to it to the end. You're forgiven -- though that wasn't totally easy for God, he could do that unilaterally. The difficult part for him, which goes beyond his power, is watching you, seeing you reject him, perhaps move off the path to holiness, risking your life, perhaps spit in his face and reject him permanently.

Perhaps there are people who need to hear a message of "your problems are solved by meditating on how God unilaterally forgave you". There are many different kinds of people, and some may implicitly get on the path to being 100% and stay on it, or be the kind of people, who, when asked by God, will get on it, simply by the power of their gratitude or encouragement due to the forgiving of their sins. So it doesn't matter in the end for them.

But, for other people, it is not good to only be presented with unilateral forgiveness, perhaps because they want to know the truth (which indicates that overall, salvation is a bilateral process), or because they simply don't get that much out of meditating on God's unilateral forgiveness of them. Maybe they don't truly understand how guilty they are? Well, maybe some preacher can instill in them a sense of guilt. But maybe that's unnecessary. Religions offer a fix to life's fundamental problems, so those problems have to stick around, and maybe religion has to keep making them be a problem to justify itself. I would rather there be a way for people to want to seek God that does not rely on people having to feel inadequate and guilty, whether because the Christianity that results is poisoned with a sense of inadequacy and guilt or the aftereffects of those personality traits, or because there are people who just don't have inadequacy and guilt centers in their brains who can't be Christians if that's the only way to be a

Christian.

Is there an MSLN way to forgive your spouse, though? Or is it the case that the best way to forgive your spouse is through the route of inadequacy, guilt, forgiveness, gratitude? I find myself able to forgive people -- not always to trust them, but I don't really want anything bad to happen to the people who have hurt me on account of what they have done. My mind replays old traumas sometimes, but I don't think we should take every instinct of our minds as being reflective of what we really want. Maybe by not trusting them, I am not speaking their love language, and they don't feel loved, and then they think that means I don't forgive them. I have a life to live, in its limitations, and there is work for me to do, and people I need to interact with. It's okay to end relationships and get out of abusive ones and move on. Perhaps in a future life, I will have to confront them. But, it would be for their sake, not for my own, and if they are mature, they don't need my love. I may never need to trust them or interact with them again. And that's okay.

I think I forgive people -- maybe I don't even get offended at people in the first place, but just become traumatized by them and afraid of them. At least once, I've defended myself somewhat desperately from people from the past, but not out of any real concern for what they did in the past. And I'm not really a guilt or inadequacy type of person -- I don't feel those feelings much. So it looks like you don't have to go through the route of inadequacy, guilt, forgiveness, gratitude in order to forgive people who have hurt you. But, since I've never been married, maybe I don't know how hard it really is to forgive a spouse, harder than forgiving seemingly worse people. I would guess, though, that for some people, forgiveness in any context does not require a strong sense of being forgiven.

I think a doctrinal reason to forgive is simply that if you don't, you won't be forgiven. (That comes from Jesus.) If we want a non-biblical but theistic explanation for why we must forgive people, we could say "If you don't forgive someone, you want them to be utterly not accepted because of what they did, so you call justice on them. The problem is that justice requires you to not be accepted either. Justice is not your servant or friend and will turn on you once you invoke it. Unless you want to use pseudo-justice on the people you don't want to forgive, like pretending it's about justice when you just want revenge or a payout. Pseudo-justice is much less demanding than justice but it's a lie, and you're using a lie to justify them being utterly not accepted, which with God in the room means, destroyed in hell. That lie itself merits destruction in hell. So either way, it is dangerous to not forgive." I don't know if there is a more New Wine-specific reason to forgive, but maybe one could say something like "You have to forgive everyone, someday out of your own free will you will forgive everyone, or else you will go to hell, and you don't want to do that, so you'll make it, don't take this process for granted, you have a lot of time

but get on it sooner rather than later."

How different is this from Keller's approach? It's certainly different in tone. I feel like moving on from this question right now (just to wrap up this chapter tonight), but maybe I'll catch it again when I review these notes.

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Finished Chapter 5.

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Ch. 6

Kathy Keller (main writer of this chapter) notes the possibility of abuse in marriage (p. 190): --Agreeing on gender roles as a foundational part of your marriage takes two people, but what if your spouse persists in a wrong interpretation of his or her role? Wouldn't it just be better to assume the egalitarian, unisex roles that we use in the world as a protection against misuse and outright abuse?--

Her response to that question seems to be something like: "be a servant, because both husbands and wives are called to be servants, just different kinds. Try this unilaterally." I suppose this could be a good response to some abusive marriages, but perhaps not others.

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Finished ch. 6.

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Finished ch. 7

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Finished ch. 8.

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Finished Epilogue.

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In the Appendix, Kathy Keller makes another reference to abuse (p. 242) -- *A wife is not to give her husband unconditional obedience.* [her emphasis, used as a header] No human being should give any other human being unconditional obedience. As Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). In other words, a wife should not obey or aid a husband in doing things that God forbids, such as selling drugs or physically abusing her. If, for example, he beats her, the "strong help" that a wife should exercise is to love and forgive him in her heart but have him arrested. It is never kind or loving to anyone to make it easy for him or her

to do wrong.--

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Finished Appendix. (Finished the book, except I didn't read most of the notes.)

Labels: #book review, #celibacy, #Christianity, #family, #forgiveness, #holiness, #Jesus, #marriage, #maturity, #monasticism, #romance, #Tim Keller

Book Review: Along the Way, ed. Ron Bruner and Dana Kennamer Pemberton

%book-review-along-way-ed-ron-bruner-and

Thursday, September 22, 2022

See also the preview for this review.

Instead of writing a full review of *Along the Way*, here are my notes.

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Along the Way notes

The authors of Along the Way are:
Ch. 1 -- Ron Bruner and Dana Pemberton
Ch. 2 -- Ron Bruner
Ch. 3 -- Steven Bonner
Ch. 4 -- Ron Bruner
Ch. 5 -- Samjung Kang-Hamilton
Ch. 6 -- Samjung Kang-Hamilton
Ch. 7 -- Holly Catterton Allen
Ch. 8 -- Nathan Pickard
Ch. 9 -- Jeff W. Childers
Ch. 10 -- Jeff W. Childers
Ch. 11 -- Ryan Maloney
Ch. 12 -- Dana Kennamer Pemberton
Ch. 13 -- Suzetta Nutt
Ch. 14 -- Shannon Rains
Ch. 15 -- Dana Kennamer Pemberton

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Finished chapter 1.

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Finished chapter 2.

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Chapter two talks about the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement's "theology of children". Infant baptism is rejected as unbiblical, while an equally unbiblical "age of accountability" is added to explain how it is that

unbaptized children who die do not go to hell (having not yet attained a certain age at which they are morally developed enough to be accountable). Those views are familiar to me from having grown up in a Church of Christ. One which is unfamiliar is a logical corrolary (although maybe not a necessary one) that [unbaptized] children are not part of the kingdom of God. Also, there are newer views which seem somewhat consonant with what I grew up with, that children are on a faith journey.

Baptism is important for salvation in the Churches of Christ -- it's essential. It may be essential for salvation in MSLN as well, or it may not be. (Because it may be, it is important.) It makes sense for it to be seen as a weighty thing connected to salvation, and thus a significant rite of passage for young people (or anyone). However, [in MSLN], children who die unbaptized are not (from that) destined to lose their salvation. So it makes sense to see them as being in relationship with God, in a sense in good standing with God (thus on a faith journey, and part of the kingdom of God).

That chapter didn't discuss child evangelism. Maybe the book will discuss it later. In case it does not, I will discuss it now.

How should adults evangelize children, given MSLN? I'm not completely sure, but my instinct at this point is to say that adults should practice "urgent libertarian holiness", desiring that their children be saved (come into a relationship with God that persists to the point that they are 100% holy) but not force them to see that in any way. Don't do anything manipulative or dishonest in teaching your children about God. Better to simply be as saved as you want them to be, and in that way anti-tempt them. But the spirit with which you relate to them (and anyone or else) should be urgent, and desirous of their salvation.

However, one aspect of salvation in MSLN is coming to love doing good, which spills over into good behavior. Should an MSLN-believing parent refrain from enforcing good behavior, since it might coerce the love of good, which is part of salvation? Unfortunately, a certain amount of coercion or coercion-adjacent behavior may be needed, not for the child's salvation, but because good behavior is necessary for children to succeed socially, or for the child to be responsible enough to take care of him- or herself, or for some other significant practical reason. These are things that enable children to make the most of their life on earth.

Children need to learn to love doing what is right for its own sake, not because it's socially rewarded or pragmatic. This is part of loving things the way God does. But that lesson has to be learned later in life, I guess.

[Maybe to some extent it can be learned in childhood, even if you can't always intentionally set up the circumstances where they have effective freedom of choice between better and worse, or can't guide children to

make exactly the right choice. There's a reality that is best learned in wild places, and children can enter into some of the wild places.]

If you want to raise your children in the faith in a libertarian way, perhaps you are safe if you simply speak the truth, intending only to speak it, and not to enforce it or make it be heard or understood. Children can be exposed to much more truth in this way than if they are forced to engage with it or make a decision based on it. For instance, reading the Bible aloud to children [with no expectation of a response or even that the children necessarily listen to any given part] exposes them to much more truth than is age-appropriate or necessary for them -- but some of them may benefit from parts a parent couldn't have predicted were beneficial (the child might be ready for them sooner than the parent realizes). Children have a way of filtering out things they are not ready to hear. Pushing children to hear things might work, but be controlling or too forceful.

I will say that I was raised by a basically libertarian parenting with respect to faith. So it is an obvious thing for me to reach for as I try to think of things to recommend (and, I am biased toward it). However, I can say that I see the benefits of it. Libertarian, or libertarian-leaning parenting (in my experience) can have its downsides, for instance in preparing a person to deal with responsiblity or the social world. But, in my experience, it encourages a person to develop their own faith and their own relationship with God. I suppose those upsides and downsides are what I would expect from a disestablished thing.

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I can hear a pro-child evangelism person saying something like: It's important that we evangelize children in some other way than neutrally presenting the truth and being saved ourselves, because, even if it is the case that we persuade them to follow God for fake reasons, or out of some kind of social obligation, or for pragmatic reasons, or in some way other than that they love God for who he is -- though all this may sound less than really good, and require some kind of correction later in life, what's important is to keep them out of even worse things: temporal (drugs, gangs, premarital sex, dropping out of school) or spiritual (other religions, worldviews, simply not having a part of their brain that naturally responds to the word "God").

I can see some merit to those objections. Maybe it is the case, as with other things in life, that the lesser of two evils is better than the greater, and if those are your only two options, you should choose the lesser. But, I think that if it is at all possible to address the spiritual dangers of not evangelizing children by evangelizing them with simply presenting the truth and being saved ourselves (or perhaps something else that goes with that approach), that should be the way to go. It should be something that

child evangelists think about, as a possible alternative to more manipulative or fake approaches.

I talk about anti-temptation. Is anti-temptation simply the temptation to do what is right or to love God? Like with Buber (who claims something like that we don't relate to God the same way we relate to an idol, and so we can't simply replace the object of relating or worship with God, without changing the character of it), so anti-temptation is of a different character than temptation. Temptation is about addicting and forcing, and also about taking power over someone else's mind. Temptation is about knowing someone's nature and predicting them. So anti-temptation is not about exerting psychological power on people, and not about figuring them out, knowing their psychological vulnerabilities better than they do.

Perhaps it is the case that a somewhat "tempting" child evangelism is more effective in the short run, creating a first approximation of love of God which is necessarily immature, because children are immature. Then, when children grow older, that first approximation can be corrected.

Does it get corrected? Or do people go through life with a basically immature relationship to God? How do you explain to a 30 year old that their relationship to God and life in general is immature? What about a 50 year old? There comes an age at which we feel like we are mature, and just like children, come to be unable to comprehend certain sentences, such as "you are a functioning, perhaps even psychologically healthy and well-adjusted adult, but you are deeply spiritually immature".

Probably it does get corrected in some cases, and not in others.

Some people believe in child immaturity more than is warranted. I first attended a public school that mostly had low-income students, up to grade 5. The school was a charter school with some history, and it had things like Orff-Schulwerk (or Orff-Schulwerk inspired) music education and "families" (a weekly class with the same teacher over the whole elementary school education, with students of different grade levels in each "families" class). So it had some affinity with Waldorf education or things like that. There was (perhaps therefore) a kind of generosity and respect from the teachers.

Low-income students have to go on to deal with life in a real way. Teachers who see children with generosity and respect treat (treated) those children as though they were significant and to be expected to be mature. They couldn't afford to be immature.

I remember some of the students in a grade higher than mine were more mature than me, and I still somehow expect them to be more mature than me, and always so. Even maybe those 5th graders [at that age] that I knew when I was in 4th grade [they are somehow still more mature than me now] -- there are dimensions to maturity that some children possess but

which adults sometimes do not.

But then I graduated and started attending an elementary school that went to the 6th grade, part of a private Christian school system that I attended until 12th grade. At my previous school, it was like we were seen as having our roots in the future as full adults. But at my new school, it was like we were seen as having our roots in some innocent, cute past -- when we were five years old, perhaps. This may have been exacerbated by the teacher I had, who perhaps was inclined to look down on us and infantilize us, in a way that other teachers at the school may not have been. I (and a number of my classmates) did not like her, and going to 7th grade, with many teachers, was a breath of fresh air.

But though none of the other teachers were as intensely anti-maturity as her, it seemed like even the more "real" or serious ones either could not see the possibility of a Christian school that carried on the maturity of my public school, or could but were stuck in the environment they were in, which was more powerful than them.

Certainly class had something to do with it, comparing expectations one would have for low-income people versus middle-class as most of the private school students were. I don't want to say that secular schooling is really better for people's maturity than Christian schooling, although I do think my particular secular elementary school was better than my Christian education. (I think secular schooling could fail to really communicate the need for maturity to their students, even though the teachers would well be aware of that need -- a problem of too much despair, perhaps, rather than of too little facing "reality" / dark things.) But I think that perhaps an emphasis on "you are a child of God" makes you think "I need to be a child; I need to be a child my whole life; I need to be childlike my whole life; it is better for me to have the sins of childhood my whole life than the sins of adulthood" and to have a sense that someone will take care of you -- God, but you don't really believe in God for yourself necessarily, so if you don't, then the church, or some other human or group of humans. Then, church leadership becomes unhappy that their "children" don't become "adults" like them and help them work. So the church leadership overworks and takes too much control. (A pattern I have seen, which again, is from my particular experience, but which might apply elsewhere.)

[*Teaching Children to Care*, I would say, would have fit fairly well in my public elementary school -- perhaps some of the teachers were aware of it, even.]

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Perhaps adulthood is overrated, and we should honor childhood? I think there are two different paths to honoring childhood. One is the way of my

public school, which honored how it could be that 10-year-olds could have their roots in the future, in capability, responsibility and respect and respectworthiness. Childhood can be mature, can be 100% childhood and 100% mature, and calling out the maturity of childhood honors childhood.

Another way to honor childhood is to say that the things in it which are precious, cute, immature, antithetical to capable, responsible adulthood, are to be valued, are in fact worthy of respect, though, when adults practice them, they usually are not fully respectful. We honor children by saying that it is their radical difference from adulthood that is to be honored, not their similarities with adults, the maturity that they can share with (some) adults.

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One understandable fear that might justify protecting immaturity is to protect children from abusive "taskmasters". It's not good to hate children in their immaturity. Better to respect them for having, in fact, their roots in their future, though their behaviors happen to have something to do with being 5 or 10 years old.

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Ch. 3

The author says (p. 41) --Since our children are children of God, we should *so* weave them into the life of the church that they cannot ever recall life without Christ.--

This sounds somewhat dangerous to me. It's like being in water your whole life so you never deeply understand wetness. In fact, this sounds somewhat like my upbringing. I had a shallow faith, that was only redeemed by seriously confronting atheism. That shallow faith (including a shallow love and trust of God) was not sufficient to save me. Imagining a future where other obvious life challenges are done away with through civilizational development, where can we find that deepening work? Maybe by not steeping our children in our faith, so that they can see it in an alien way, for themselves.

Another danger is that "Christ" is a word that often means "Jesus as we understand him". To be raised in Christianity that is so totalizing, it may be that some never seriously question "Jesus as we understand him". But to have had a non-Christian life enables us to see "Jesus as we understand him" and not-"Jesus as we understand him". This helps us to look for "Jesus as he is". We will end up with a new "Jesus as we understand him" which searches for "Jesus as he is". I might believe it if told that the author of this section is in favor of searching for "Jesus as he is", and might try to pursue that or talk about it around younger people. But, a church that is too good at making a comfortable, complete mental environment (intellectually

comfortable even if not so in other ways), reduces the likelihood that the church as a whole will spontaneously generate the openness to change that may be necessary if their "Jesus as they understand him" is bad. Or, taking all churches in the church universal, if the church universal is always really good at integrating people into its own environments, if the church needs reform, there may not be enough reformers.

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The author talks a lot about children being the spiritual teachers of adults. I like this thought, generally.

I think that an adult can easily filter out the immaturity of children and disregard [it] in terms of its instructive value, and instead focus on the ways that children are mature, more so, or differently, than adults. Likewise, adolescents and young adults are similar to children in that respect.

"Maturity as we understand it" is shaped by secular thinking (like by academic psychology, or mental health), and also by the ways that we are damaged and recover as we live. Secular thinking can have some wisdom but is not totally reliable and can invalidate belief in and trust of God. The ways that we are damaged and heal may be like the ways that we lose a limb but now the pain has gone away from healing -- better that we hadn't lost the limb in the first place, and better that it grow back than that we make our "adult" state the standard for "the way things should be".

When we change our minds, we think we have done so toward a better truth, and often that is so. But we can also change our minds due to something like (or literally?) brain damage, and life with its traumas and grinding sameness and ongoingness does something to us that it hasn't yet done to those sufficiently younger than us.

In other words, wisdom is the natural gift of older people, but some wisdom is bad wisdom. Children may accept good wisdom more readily than adults, for lacking the damage acquired by adults.

Along the Way notes

Ch. 4

The author mentions Deuteronomy 6:20-22 which talks about children asking the meaning of the observance of the Mosaic Law. Children ask questions about all kinds of things. So parents (and sometimes others) have to give some kind of answer.

I feel like at this point, I'm reaching the limits of my experience, because I don't spend much time around children, do not have any of my own. So maybe I won't say how it is that parents should explain MSLN to their children, because I don't know and don't trust myself to guess. I guess you

can always try to tell your children the truth, without intending that they convert to your religion (in keeping with what I've written already in these notes). But I don't know how to do that.

Along the Way notes

Ch. 5

p. 65 --As J. J. Dillon has put it, children are "deep thinkers and feelers who wrestle with life's mysteries and hunger for meaning and value by which to live their lives." [source for Dillon quote: "The Spiritual Child: Appreciating Children's Transformative Effects on Adults," *Encounter* 13 (2000): 4]--

Do we find ourselves encountering adults who are "deep feelers and thinkers who wrestle with life's mysteries and hunger for meaning and value by which to live their lives"? Do we take them seriously? The framing of "wrestle with life's mysteries" makes it sound like the profound truths are things that if you try to engage with them, the best you can manage is to "wrestle" with them, and they will always remain "mysteries". In other words, you will naively think there are useful answers to those questions, but in fact there are not, and you will struggle uselessly to understand them. This might prove you to be a "good person" or a "deep person", but also from another perspective, a "stupid person" or a "naive person". We can afford to be patronizing to children (although that may not be the author of this chapter's, or Dillon's, intended meaning), by praising them for thinking and feeling deeply (uselessly), for being noble humans with sensitive spirits, but adults have "reality" to deal with -- tasks to do, things to maintain. Children may be among their things to maintain, and maybe spending time in their deep thinking / feeling, meaning-seeking world is good for our children, so that their hearts can be validated until they are old enough to not need meaning, and instead perform tasks and fit in to a social environment, like a functional adult.

But, as Dillon's article title and quote may together suggest, maybe children can have a transformative effect on adults by showing the adults that deep-thinking-and-feeling, meaning-seeking side. Do we see parents, once presented by that side, feeling something stir in them, their own childhood coming to them to be integrated with their adulthood, and the adults then becoming deep-thinking, deep-feeling meaning-seekers? Or do the adults instead feel a sense of "being humbled" and honor their children, while not fundamentally adopting their children's values? Are their children an image of God that they "worship" rather than "obey", or rather than grasping by sharing the same heart? Maybe the outcome depends on the specific parents in question.

Framing the truth as a "profound mystery" is supposed to humble us, but then it becomes useless since we can't understand it. But what if the truth

really makes perfect sense, is just as profound as ever, and therefore motivates us to behave (perhaps radically) differently? Children may be looking for the non-mysterious truth, that's what we call "wrestling with mystery".

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Overall, I like the sensibility of this chapter / author better than the previous ones, (a note to those who might only want to read part of this book).

The chapter ends (p. 76) with: --Along the way, we adults can also grow, for the best way to learn is to teach, and the best way to be loved is to love.--

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Ch. 6

The author (same as last chapter) talks about techniques of prayer with children.

It's possible that adult-initiated prayers push prayer into a child's mind (same with other religious experiences), but that this could be a bad thing in the long run. For one, this makes prayer a social thing. Social things have a fleshly compellingness (peer pressure, desire to please authority figures, perhaps other social instincts). Maybe the child doesn't deeply want to pray, and will learn to go through the motions on many levels but not deeply love and trust God for him- or herself.

Also, any experience can become obsessing and burn a person out if it is repeated too often. This was my experience with church services, the inciting event for me quitting going to church. As a child, I felt like, for religious reasons, I needed to fully engage with every prayer and every song that was part of my environment. Eventually, the corrosiveness of those prayers and songs (as experiences, as social obligations) broke my ability to tolerate them. Praying or singing (or the like) in a home might be seen as a magic spell to bring God into a family, but the magic can work far too well, at least for people like me.

(Spells are often cast out of anxiety.)

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Finished ch. 6.

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Ch. 7

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Finished Ch. 7

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Ch. 8

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This chapter is about how unbiblical theological presuppositions are why Churches of Christ don't let children take communion.

I am not sure about the biblical warrant for excluding children, but I do think it's good to have some exclusive elements to church, which say "you are not there yet, you need to change before you're really a Christian". The author of this chapter seems to want to include everyone into one body -- one body in which we all belong. But does that one body belong to God? No, not exactly. It's not just that "we all sin" or "we all mess up", which are words that will bring you inclusion and belonging in the social structure of the church, so unless you are sufficiently theistically minded, you will think "I'm okay" since what you really track is whether a people group includes you, not whether you love God with all your being. The sense of "I'm not there yet", should sober you and drive you, because there is real danger to remaining where you are in your moral development and your relationship to God.

The author describes a historical, modern, and near-future vision of Church of Christ communion. The historical and modern are affected by individualist and Anselmian (penal substitutionary) ideas. But the near future one makes communion about entering the Messianic era.

I am not convinced from this chapter that Anselm was totally wrong. My naive sense, from reading a book on the atonement, is that there are multiple theories of the atonement, which all make some sense, but aren't conclusively "the" answer. Maybe from an Anselmian point of view, we should exclude (children? the unbaptized? the unconfirmed? those who are not disciples of Jesus?) from communion.

Church wants to include everyone, but the disciples of Jesus are few. I remember when I was just entering college, I was appraised by two different older people, one of whom was an individualist Christian, who casually called me someone "raised in the church", rather than Christian, the other a church-attending Christian who, after hearing what I said, said that I wasn't a Christian. But I had gone to church and identified myself with Christianity... I called myself a Christian -- wasn't I a Christian? What is this label "Christian" and why should we want it so much? Being a disciple of Jesus is somewhat better defined -- do you obey Jesus' commands in the Gospels? Do you seriously aspire to? But "Christian" is something that has been and is defined by the church, and it's unclear whether it's really about inclusion in the social body of the church or if it

means that you are saved in the eyes of God, or something else.

It's the church's job (so it seems) to include everyone, but Jesus says that some follow him, and some don't. Do we prevent people from really following Jesus by turning them into "Christians"?

A challenge for MSLN Christianity would be to say "church and disciples are one", at least in that "in our general assembly, our maximally socially inclusive space, we preach a gospel of you are not there yet and there is real spiritual danger to that, and graciously, there is a way for you to get there, obey Jesus". In that way, the identity of "I really belong to the 'body of Christ' (the church universal, which we perhaps unjustifiably indentify with corporate churches and the particular corporate church we attend)" does not smother or prevent the possibility of motions of sober drivenness toward complete holiness.

The "Messianic kingdom" means something to the author -- I suppose not an Anselmian or individualist thing. I think for him it has something to do with being the people who do God's work in the world. (The people who call people to repent so that Jesus' blood of atonement can cover them? Seemingly not. The people who call people to repent to the point of having the heart of God -- i.e. completely turning against sin and being willing to go to the literal cross, putting God ahead of even their own lives? That might sound better to him, but I'm not sure in practice that's what he has in mind. It's possible he really means "feed people physical food" or "help people with the same psychological problems a secular therapist would" and things in that category.)

In any case, the Messianic kingdom sounds good to me, for some meaning of "Messianic kingdom", and I can agree that probably that is part of the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

The author ends the chapter like this (p. 124): --The theological trajectories we inherited for the Lord's Supper are being challenged and transformed. So, what would happen if the table we gather around on Sunday morning lost its boundary markers and altar theology, and instead, became an enactment of the Messianic era? What would happen if we welcomed our children to a table that empowered them to shape their lives by the story of Jesus? What would happen if our children saw a table without boundaries? Would it then not lead our children to be bearers of the Messianic kingdom? Would our children not be living out the story of Jesus?--

I am not too optimistic about the power of official rituals to shape deep commitment, at least, not without the children, themselves, apart form anyone else ("individualistically", perhaps), taking on the identity of disciple of Jesus, relating to God by themselves, for themselves. This is part of the story of Jesus, who was an individual.

Official things are things which a social group institutes by its own authority whether its members agree to it in every moment or not. Perhaps sometimes it is the case that all members agree to one official institution at one point in time, by taking a vote. But after that, there is no essential guarantee that an official statement made by a group is really affirmed by everyone in it. So the official thing provides a face for everyone without them necessarily really being the rest of the person behind the face. Official things help create a sense of "we are a social body", which can have some benefits. But they are also dangerous because they enable people to wear a face that is not theirs, and to see the face that is not theirs when they look in a mirror.

(Looking back, I agree with the two people who thought I wasn't necessarily a Christian when I was a freshman in college.)

Why did Jesus institute the Lord's Supper? I haven't done a thorough study of this. But clearly at least he did institute a ritual. How often did he intend us to take the Lord's Supper? Some churches practice it once a week, but others only once a year. Some takings of the Lord's Supper can be meaningful, in the sense of being communicative of something deep. I think I have experienced that twice in my life. Those two, or at least one of them, was sacramental -- not because a priest (or magisterium) said so, or because it was some kind of dry objective fact in which I had faith, but because of my own relationship with God in the spiritual world at that particular time in my life, I knew that that particular experience was a kind of communicative vision. I do not assume that my weekly takings of communion back when I went to church had any special power or significance, any more than if I said Christian words without really meaning them. Maybe we should only take communion a few times in our lives, or only when moved to personally. Then, it should not be offered regularly, but should be sought out.

I could see a small group of people spontaneously (and non-coercively) seeking out the Lord's Supper, such that all of them really did want to do it. But the larger the group, the more official that institution becomes, and the more likely a significant portion of people are just along for the ride. "Power is a broken relationship" if some people can affect many people without the many (or individuals in the many) being able to affect them back. "Coercion", "force", and this kind of "power" are all the same, or are significantly similar. If you do things in a large group, you tend to have a few people, or a majority, making decisions for every individual. If you don't feel moved to take communion at the time and setting, and in the manner, decided by some impenetrable "leadership" or "church majority", you can take it or leave it. Maybe the most expedient thing to do is to turn part of yourself off and make a meaningless action at the expected time.

Humility says that you change yourself to fit other people (maybe... but why don't other people humbly change themselves to allow you to not

have to fit them when that's not necessary?) If humility says that you change yourself to fit other people, then you could easily go from being real and a misfit, to being fake but outwardly compliant. (Perhaps there is a humility to undergoing the rigors and isolation that come from obeying God, who sometimes is the one who tells you who you are in opposition to your social setting.)

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Ch. 9

This chapter is about baptism, with a connection to how to approach children's baptism. It's the first of two chapters on the subject.

So far, I agree with the author about some things, perhaps many. For instance, the old view of baptism in the Churches of Christ was much like other conservative Protestants -- in that, there was a view that there is a life of sin, some decisive conversion with some kind of act, and then a state of being saved. So baptism happened to be the completion of the decisive conversion in the Churches of Christ, unlike saying the "sinner's prayer" or something like that in other groups. This old view is sort of what I was raised under, and it didn't exactly make sense. I certainly lacked an important element of salvation when I was growing up, but I also possessed an important element of it. I couldn't easily repent of my whole-souled alienation from God, but that meant I couldn't easily "repent to" a whole-souled identification with God. I now understand that my lack of a whole-souled identification with God is enough to keep me out of heaven (and threatens to keep, I assume, the author of this chapter out of heaven, along with any other church person -- in that sense, nobody is saved). I think I agree with some of this chapter's author's emphases on holiness, but I am not sure he understands that holiness is life-or-death.

I think there are two kinds of people: those who effectively enough see that it is possible (or probable, or certain) that there is something life or death about life and that we don't necessarily know what it is or are in right relationship with that truth, but must come to know (or have come to know) it, or the way to it; and those who do not effectively enough see that. I got the feeling after reading this chapter that the author is not a "life-or-death" type person. Conservative Protestants, perhaps, or conservative Americans, tend to be that more so. The secular people who are responsible for life and death issues tend to be more so. I think that if I were a conservative Protestant, or a serious-minded secular person, I would not trust the author of this chapter, because he seems to not understand or even be cleverly avoiding the issue of life or death.

I do agree with the author that my naive reading of the New Testament (or maybe the Bible as a whole) does not leave me with the sense that sins or atonement for sins are "the" issue. I have learned (to my chagrin, I guess)

that my own writing can have an emphasis that obscures the facts that it presents. (I wrote a book that presents Christian words, but I fear that its emphasis is really on left-leaning, existentialist-leaning, humanism -- not sufficiently theistic humanism, thus effectively secular humanism -- which was not my intention.)

Even if the emphasis of the scriptures is on something other than life or death, for someone concerned with life or death, do its words say "don't worry about life-or-death"? Are the facts of the worldview presented in scripture such that we can forget about that, just because it has some language that doesn't sound directly oriented toward life-or-death, to the level of bluntness and simplicity (/ oversimplification) of revivalism? It may be unfortunate that Scripture is written in such a way that it can be misinterpreted, but the wise will not forget the truth when they read it. The quiet words, if taken as seriously as they deserve to be taken, can really deserve to dominate our understanding of the plentiful, loud words.

(I don't know where that principle of interpretation would take someone if applied rigorously, but it makes sense to me.)

I believe that children who are not baptized do not go to hell for that, but instead are resurrected to the Millennium along with most other people, where they can get baptized if it's necessary for salvation. I don't think we can rule out that it is necessary for salvation, as it's (probably?) part of obedience to God, and total obedience to God is necessary for salvation. It is dangerous to bias children against baptism or that they think that it couldn't possibly have anything to do with salvation, because that could make them resist obeying God -- those are some important things for us to think about in this life. It is a good thing for children to be baptized whenever it is really their idea and they basically understand what it means (at least I don't see an obvious problem with that and I do see a strong prima facie motivation for it).

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Ch. 10

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Finished Ch. 10

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I thought I should re-read chapter nine to explain some of what I said about it.

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p. 126 - 127 --Growing out of a heritage of revivalist preaching, the meaning and significance of baptism might seem plain and obvious:

sinners are baptized to express their obedience to Christ, to have their sins washed away, and to become members of the Lord's church. This is good, as far as it goes. Yet when we turn to the New Testament, we discover that Jesus and the early Christian writers go much further.--

The question I would have to begin with is: what is most important? Could it be anything other than keeping people out of hell, so that they can be with God forever? If you do something like Pascal's wager, you see that mathematically, eternal life dominates everything else. You might also think of it like: do people matter? If people really matter, shouldn't they exist? The thing that makes them not exist (from an annihilationist standpoint, which I think is probably the Biblical one and the only one which makes sense philosophically) is hell. So if you love people, if you really value them, you must keep them out of hell. If they go to hell, they are lost, and no longer exist. It doesn't matter how nice their lives were, or how good their religious walk was, unless those things contribute to keeping them out of hell, so that they can continue to exist, with God.

If this emphasis on people and them existing matters, then if we lose sight of it, we have been deceived.

Now, I can see how obeying Christ and having a person's sins washed away could connect to people living, existing, with God, and not dying / being destroyed. Being a member of the church might have some connection.

The author of ch. 9 wants to add things to these, to flesh out baptism. Do any of these take away our responsibility to be concerned for the salvation of people (including children), from the second death; at all, or especially with respect to the roles of baptism in helping people be saved?

The author lists the following other interpretations of baptism: p. 127 --an ordeal of sacrifice and self-denial-- --a sacred womb, a place of spiritual rebirth, where a person goes in order to see what the kingdom looks like-- --like crossing the Red Sea, a watershed event of liberation that helps define the identity of the people and their covenant relationship with God-- --[a place to] leave behind the evil powers that had enslaved them to drown under the waves-- --the baptistery as a tomb: taken under the water to join Jesus in death, the baptized person is raised up to live differently-- --baptism is the water floating Noah's boat, saving humankind-- --an adoption ritual, a special venue of operation for the Holy Spirit, washing and renewing a person by God's grace so that they may become heirs of the Father, full of hope and the good deeds flowing out of it. --the baptistery is a place to meet the community of faith and become part of Jesus' body, as one of its many members; it is a key to congregational unity and instrumental in helping disciples find their places in the body-- --the baptistery is a place to change clothes, putting on Jesus, and it dismantles false distinctions between people by putting everyone on the

same footing before God-- --Baptism connects a person with the Father, Son, and Spirit, opening a door into the very life of God--

He ends that list with --And yes -- baptism cleans us, bringing forgiveness of sins--

The effect that his rhetoric has on me is to make me think "Oh, forgiveness of sins is this little thing over to the side, but look how rich and deep is this baptism concept! Look at how beautiful, spiritual, and poetic it really is!" Because, for better or worse, the Bible is often beautiful, spiritual, and poetic. But... still... what about people ending up in hell? Isn't that last part (about bringing forgiveness of sins) completely dominant over everything else, unless they also contribute to keeping people out of hell? And, if they also contribute to salvation, isn't it unlikely that they *remove* the importance of forgiveness, by *adding more things* that are also of life and death importance?

I wonder if the author of this chapter has some doctrinal understanding somewhere that causes him to think that a) there is some other source of forgiveness of sins, or b) that forgiveness of sins doesn't matter. Maybe I missed it, reading the chapter the first time.

p. 127 - 128 --How many different ways can we talk about the importance of baptism and its meaning? The Bible shows how important baptism was to Jesus, the apostles, and the early church. Underemphasizing baptism is an answer to many different questions. Yet the questions are not so much about qualifying for church membership or certifying eternal destiny. Most of the time, they are not even about how to "get saved." Instead, they are more about identity, the direction of a person's life, their place within the community, handling relationships, and cooperating with the activity of the Father, Son, and Spirit in experiencing daily transformation of character and behavior.--

The author's rhetoric starts out by reassuring me that baptism is important (at least, that's its effect on me). Baptism is so important, its meaning is so rich, that it's mostly not about "getting saved". He doesn't deny that it's about getting saved. But "getting saved" (is this identical with people not being destroyed in hell?) is not that big a deal to him? Perhaps this is only his emphasis, or the effect of his words on me. Does he deny that baptism can be about "certifying eternal destiny" when he says that baptism is "not so much" about that? I wouldn't assume that baptism is the sole determining factor of salvation, but surely if it washes away sins, it might be a necessary part of it?

Does the author think that baptism is a life-or-death thing that must be accomplished before someone can go to heaven, or not?

Does life-or-deathness matter? Does baptism perform a necessary role in salvation (in some sense removing or forgiving sin)? If baptism is a life-or-

death thing, and life-or-deathness matters, then it makes a lot of sense to have a revivalist view of baptism. It makes sense to be anxious about whether your children have entered the age of accountability and now if they die for some unforeseen reason, they might be going to hell. It makes sense to communicate to your children that they are not full members of the church, because in fact they are not saved and should not completely feel like they are. Their faith in God may be pure and innocent, but God is completely holy and every child has sinned. Maybe that makes God weird and inhumane in our eyes, but perhaps that seems so to us because we are not holy ourselves and lack the intuitive sense that sin is unacceptable. Much of what the author pushes back against comes out of simply being concerned about the loss of people and thinking that baptism has some essential role to play in them not being lost, through dealing with their sin problem.

p. 129 --In short, less preoccupation with the "essentiality of baptism" and greater study of its essence would be a welcome change, going a long way towards equipping us to address those practical matters from a solid foundation.--

The author goes on to a section entitled "The Essence of Baptism".

He says that baptism is about Jesus. With regard to the famous Acts 2:38 passage, he says that baptism of cleansing for sin was a normal Jewish thing, but what was really new was the promise of "the gift of the Holy Spirit" and that all this was centered "in the name of Jesus". Somehow, as a reader, I feel like just proved that forgiveness of sins doesn't matter, because of that. Does this make sense logically? Maybe if we say "Jewish things are false, irrelevant, something like that, but new, specifically Christian things are true, relevant, valid, etc." Is that what the author wants to claim? It might be fitting in a Church of Christ context to reject Jewish understandings in favor of post-Jewish ones. Are there ever cases when Jewish religious understandings are correct, and might this be one of them? Is there any chance that when Peter said that baptism was for the forgiveness of sins [or he might have said that when he said "repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins" and we can't rule that out], he might have been saying what was true and impressed on him by Jesus or the Spirit to say? I wouldn't take any chances with salvation. I would go ahead and assume baptism has something essential to do with washing away sins. If not, fine. [If it turns out it doesn't, that's fine.]

I remember growing up, I was aware of Baptist responses to Church of Christ doctrines on baptism. One of them was "if baptism is necessary for salvation, then why isn't it sufficiently emphasized such that no one could possibly be uncertain about whether it is necessary?" My response to that nowadays is, why should we assume that God is interested in making things that easy for us? Maybe he's looking for people who really love him and are *searching* for ways to follow him, taking responsibility to look

through reality to find ways to follow him, instead of having him feed us the plan of salvation, requiring less initiative on our part, or perhaps none at all. But, that has the cruel implication that many of us will never be saved, because no one taught us to look at reality. (But I will address why I am not worried about that cruel implication later.)

I assume that many people are tired of Baptist-Church of Christ debates -- if they are not still a thing to the intended audience of this book, then the older readers and writer of the book might remember those old days without fondness. But, is the issue here really that "yeah, basically the Baptists are right" or people end up making a doctrinal move that happens to align them with the Baptists all along. This may be appropriate, if the Baptists are right, but it seems like the kind of thing that should talked about openly.

p. 130 --By his own admission, Jesus was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness". It was the right thing for him to do. That may surprise some of us who have traditionally approached baptism strictly as a legal maneuver by which we deal with our sins, or as the culmination of a conversion process, since those are two things that Jesus' baptism could not mean. He needed neither conversion nor forgiveness.--

Maybe baptism is about (at least) two things: obedience, and washing away sins. Jesus, being clean, was washed, but no sins were removed. Jesus was obeying God, and if he never got baptized, he would have sinned. So Jesus was fulfilling righteousness by obeying God, and we have the same need to obey. In contrast to Jesus, we have sins that need (in some sense) to be washed away by baptism.

p. 133 --Salvation is a journey and a process. There may be a sense in which the Lord's salvation is a *thing* we can possess, or a *state* that we enter at a certain crucial point in our walk, but there is also a deep sense in which "we *are being* saved," (1 Cor. 1:18). In other words, we are caught up in an ongoing process of salvation, as part of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)".--

I agree with the author of this chapter that salvation is a journey. I think growing up in the church is much more of a gradual journey experience than an intense and clear decision. But I think that for a conservative Church of Christ person, their concern might be something like this (I knew some conservative Church of Christ members when I was in college, and I hope I am remembering their point of view accurately): "Yes, salvation is a journey. We want to get as far from falling away from God and losing our salvation as possible. That's a journey. Yes, we grow to love God more deeply. Also a journey. But superimposed on that 'journey' metaphor is the concept of 'are your sins washed away?' and we want to know, have our sins been forgiven? Have our children's sins been forgiven? If they have reached the age of accountability and not been baptized, and

die, do they go to hell?" Saying that salvation is a journey doesn't exactly deal with that issue.

He goes on to talk about how salvation is about becoming like Jesus. I feel like a basic holiness message would not have been too strange to the conservative Church of Christ people I knew. Still the question remains, in terms of dealing with past sins, how do we know that those are dealt with? Do we need to be baptized for them to be washed away?

p. 136 --We [authorial "we"] recognize that all people are (or become) sinners and need forgiveness. That includes children raised in the church.--

I guess it's possible that some kids haven't sinned yet, but how would their parents know that? How would the kids know that? The author acknowledges the possibility of needing forgiveness. So if people need forgiveness, oughtn't there be some urgency to getting them baptized, if that is necessary for forgiveness?

Immediately following: --Nor do we want to downplay the importance of powerful spiritual experiences in the lives of young people. But to treat those preparing for baptism as if the only way to get ready is by owning up to their sinfulness or by having an intense experience of some kind, is to ignore the fact that *different people come to baptism in different ways.*. This was true in the first century as it is today. The Gentile idol-worshipper who was accustomed to the immoral life of his pagan culture experienced baptism in a very different way than the law-abiding Jewess who had been preparing for the Messiah's coming all her life. Their journeys into the baptistery to join Jesus were similar in some ways, but very different in others.--

I guess the implication is that church kids are like the "law-abiding Jewess", while adult converts are like the "Gentile idol-worshipper"? Was the law-abiding Jewess sinless? No, probably not. Then probably the church kids aren't sinless either. Needing forgiveness isn't about having done really bad things or turning away from God. It's just about at all having intended something against God or consciously-enough failed to intend something that would go with loving God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Anything less than 100% is sin, and sin leads to death. Being a merely good person doesn't save you. So they "Jewess", "Gentile", church kid, and adult convert are all basically in the same situation of needing forgiveness, perhaps urgently. It's like if you have four people whose livers are failing, one because of a car accident that damaged the liver, one because of a congenital defect, one because of years of drinking, and one from hepatitis C from years of injection drugs -- that's a complicated set of issues some of which may involve it being somewhat due to the sin of the people involved, but we really can't judge. It's complicated, and all their life stories are nuanced and particular. But, is it, or is it not, the case that they need a liver transplant to keep them

from dying soon? In that sense, they are all the same and should be told basically the same thing.

I think maybe the issue with baptism is that it is both about conversion and about washing away sins (if you believe that's what it does), and it is less necessary for conversion than for washing away sins. [I don't understand what motivated this paragraph now. It might make more sense if you have just read the relevant part of *Along the Way*.]

p. 140 --Furthermore, although we would not presume to speak for God, Scripture does not support an attitude of fear and anxiety regarding the status of unbaptized children in the church, as if the ceremony of baptism were necessary to convey magical protection of our loved ones.--

This is sort of true and sort of not. The background worldview of the New Testament is that people can be lost to hell, there is a way to heaven through Jesus, and Jesus commands and institutes different things which contribute to salvation. I can't think of any time the NT church says much one way or another about child salvation or anxiety about that. I'm not sure exactly what the emphasis of the NT is, but it doesn't have a clear "letter of Paul where he lays out revivalism verse after verse". So maybe from a literary perspective, it "feels" like it's really about some kind of narrative other than life-or-death, are you saved?

(I think it's perfectly fine for God to institute a ceremony which conveys magical protection of our loved ones, and fully in keeping with reality. (Putting a seatbelt on -- is that a magical ceremony?))

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Now, I do agree with the author that revivalism has its flaws. For instance, what happens if you slip on the way to the baptistery? Baptists have it a little easier, because if you intend to follow God, then there's no tragedy if you die soon after, since you're going to heaven. But then, what about the "age of accountability" that seems necessary for those who practice believer's baptism, or, I would think, equally well for those who say that children are in *need* of salvation at some age, even if all they have to do is something like pray the "sinner's prayer"? Exactly when does that age of accountability kick in? Can anyone know when their little ones are safely innocent, or when they have just slipped over into needing salvation or else they go to hell when they die?

There are some more problems that are faced when we consider the process of evangelism, given the thought that people need to follow Jesus to be saved. For instance, what if the youth minister at your church decided not to take you to the annual regional youth rally? But that was the year that that one speaker was going to be there, who uniquely spoke to your sinfulness, who could have brought you to a state of repentance and conversion? Or what if you are a member of an uncontacted tribe in

the Amazon (and there are still some, by the way)? Or you lived in the New World before Columbus came?

I don't think that there is no such thing as tragedy, that God stamps it all out. But I do think that he would not design a system of life that would cause there to be unforced errors on his part in bringing people to salvation. Having a world where people *need* to hear about Jesus to be saved (so that they can respond appropriately), but that world is significantly bad at giving them a chance, and then they go to hell when they die, does not sound like something God would do, because God is a self-interested being, and his personal desire is for us to live. Self-interested beings do rational things.

It's always possible that God is doing something mysterious or strange that he understands and that we never will, but it's also possible that we just don't understand the not-too-mysterious truth. I tend to think that if possible, I should understand God, because then I will understand his point of view better, and can love him better that way. If I reach the limit of my understanding, maybe then there is an insoluble mystery that I have to live with. But, is that the case here?

I am not an expert on the Bible, and knowing the Bible is the kind of intellectual work that I am not good at, because I don't retain and manage bodies of facts very well. But, I did read someone else's take on the Bible that is very well-researched (although I can't say that I know for certain that it is absolutely correct, because I don't have the "chops" to seriously verify it). My strength is more in philosophy, and I see how it works there, and that mostly contents me to say that it's true.

The basic idea is that we don't go to heaven or hell when we die, instead, we rest in the grave, then we are resurrected after Jesus returns, live on earth a thousand years (the Millennium / Resurrection) and then when that's up, we either go to heaven or hell. During those thousand years, we hear about Jesus, and learn. (Some of us also weep and gnash our teeth, and experience the penalties of having been wealthy, fake Christians, or whatever -- which are not the same as hell, and which don't necessarily keep us out of heaven.) We can't enter heaven unless we are no longer sinners, and the process of overcoming sin is not trivial, but if we don't procrastinate, we can make it, it just could be hard and take a long time. It's possible for us to harden ourselves (similar idea to "falling away") and thus be incapable of growing to the point of 100% repentance and being in tune with God, loving him with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

So from this point of view, I would say that we should move with a certain kind of urgency toward obeying God whenever we get the chance, to ward off the tendency to get into procrastination. So it makes sense for the child to want to be baptized once they make the decision, and not wait around

very long.

Obviously a child can't repent except under their own will, so you can't really do anything to make your child come into tune with God in their hearts, except provide an environment in which they are provided the good ideas and good examples to choose to follow. You can apply your will to get them to behave or feel or even think they believe something, and maybe they will also really believe that thing to some extent, but maybe they don't and it was just the strength of your will on them. Sometimes that's okay (like keeping them from urgent physical harm), but when it comes to choosing God, to turn away from sin, and toward him, that's 100% their decision and you can't do any persuading of them any which way. But again, providing them with good choices is helpful.

What about baptism? Should you apply your will to get your kid to be baptized? Baptism is a discrete event -- so if your will overshadows theirs, is that not really a baptism? Maybe not. So maybe then that's a reason for them to validly need to be re-baptized, because in some important sense, they didn't mean it themselves the first time.

If your child dies, that is painful but doesn't have to be tragic, because they aren't going to hell (except in some exceedingly unlikely event that they have hardened themselves so young), and unless you harden yourself, which you are unlikely to do in this life, you will be resurrected to the next life and you can see them again (unless there's some unusual reason that you wouldn't).

Does it matter if they are baptized to wash away their sins? I'm not 100% sure about baptism, but I see that it certainly could be necessary, and that's good enough for me. I'd do it, if I hadn't already. If it is necessary to wash away sins, just like how hearing about Jesus is necessary for salvation, everyone gets a chance to fill in that gap in the Millennium.

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Re-read ch. 10 (the follow up to ch. 9).

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Read ch. 11

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Started ch. 12.

So far I like the taste of this chapter and author as much as or more than the other one I liked (ch. 5 and 6) and would also recommend it to be read. [On finishing the chapter, I still think so.]

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p. 180 --I recently heard the phrase "What we win them with is what we win them to."--

This in reference to how when we make children's ministry into a fun thing (like with talking vegetable videos or making children's church happen inside a spaceship), we might be making them into consumers of church, and then years later they won't be able to be workers in the church.

I wonder to what extent it's worth teaching children at all? Maybe it's best to leave them to play all throughout their childhoods, and just pick up Bible teaching that trickles down to them, that they overhear from people reading the Bible out loud, or that their peers talk about. Probably this does not sound like a good idea from the perspective of this book overall, and likely not from the author of this chapter. But if you take "don't be consumerist" and take it far enough, do you end up with the cold and dark side of the truth that even adult church shies away from? (The numerous ways Satan deceives and attacks us, our weird and frightening God who must be respected, and/or our weird and frightening world where God struggles to do good, or the danger that we are all in from sin, how none of us entirely has our salvation secure, as some examples.) These topics can only be really talked about in a serious spirit, or they sound unbelievable. But can we teach children with such a serious spirit? Perhaps we can avoid talking about those examples given, if they are "too much" for children, and certainly adults can sort of give lip service (or "mind service") to dark realities that they become intellectually aware of when they are older. But I don't know that people can become serious enough to really get those realities such that they can be very effective given them if the climate of their minds filters them out. And that climate is established when children are young.

I suppose I was raised in that climate, and have managed to get out of it. The way I did so was through doggedness, turning back to the text even when it didn't make sense culturally and thus experientially to me (I had the filters), and then lots of intense personal experience which opened up the world of spiritual darkness to me (the darkness that is present very commonly in people's lives at various times, but which is somehow usually unseeable). I don't expect other people to have the same background as me. So, should we teach children about God, if that roots them in "child-appropriate" views of the world? Perhaps we could teach them, but not in a fun, engaging, way, or even as "normal people", going against what feels to us like "child-appropriate" teaching.

Maybe the way to look at this teaching is like what someone earlier in the book said: is this "first-approximation" teaching something that can be revised successfully when children are older? So, is the "vibe" of a teacher (or of all the adults in the church), such that children connect with seriousness, sufficient to face spiritual darkness and death when they get

older?

The irony is that children's lived experiences are often closer to that of "I live in a weird, scary world of spirits and inexplicable rules of life" than many adults are. Maybe adults are frightened of children's fears, and keep them from fearing? I think we sometimes try to protect children from dark realities when they are young. But darkness is already a part of their lives, so how can they deal with it? What may be the case is that they are not ready cognitively to fully understand darkness. But darkness is a part of their lives and they have to deal with it somehow. We also try to keep adult realities out of kids' minds. Maybe this has some use, but kids are already living in the adult world and have to deal with it. And they have to grow up to become adults someday. Maybe it would be better if they started preparing for that when they were young.

A children's teacher could be transparent, and simply be open about their own experiences (with some discretion, for protecting legitimate privacy concerns, and for what the children can handle).

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Finished ch. 12.

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ch. 13

p. 195 (quoting Stewart and Berryman, *Young Children and Worship*, pp. 13 - 14): --The experience of God is one of mystery, awe and wonder.--

This sentiment is one that I feel like I read more than once from various authors in this book.

For me, the experience of God is either one of business-like guidance and support, or if more "heightened" or "special", of closeness, perhaps empathy and sorrow (me empathizing with him), and kinship. To some extent this follows from MSLN.

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Finished ch. 13

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Ch. 14

This book is about involving children in "the mission of the church".

p. 208 --Children are often moved to action when they encounter pain. They are kingdom bearers and as such must participate in God's redemptive work by sharing hope, showing compassion, and proclaiming the gospel.--

(After a description of taking kids to do disaster relief at a site of a severe tornado.)

Not so much as a comment on this chapter, here's a thought of how I might talk to children who are moved by the pain of the world.

People are different. In any given day, or year, there are things that a given person is good at. Some people are good at one thing, some good at another. Some people love to do certain things and thus do them a lot, and usually get better at them. Some people are good at doing things, but don't like doing them, or to work on them wears them out. If you can work at something you're good at for many years, that's a good personal fit.

Children are not as good as adults at doing some things, because they don't have as much practice. Adults, though, aren't as good as children at learning new things. So when you are a child, you have an advantage over adults in being able to learn. You can learn all kinds of things -- all about cartoons, movies, music, toys, games, etc., but also about how to care about people and how to work. It is okay to learn about cartoons, movies, music, etc., but if you want to learn more about caring about people and how to work, that helps you to help people someday.

Maybe you can try to have a higher paying job someday, and donate the extra money you make to good charities. Or, you can try to prepare for a job that directly helps people. People have physical needs (food, water, shelter, healthcare), psychological needs (the ability to trust, the ability to protect their mind from bad thoughts), social needs (the ability to relate well to other people), and spiritual needs (the ability to love and trust God). You can seek to learn more that will help you be competent and experienced in any of these areas. Then, you will be more prepared when you are older to go down life paths that help a lot of people (and also don't harm too many people as a side effect).

(I could come up with a long list of professions that fit into meeting the needs listed in the previous paragraph.)

You may someday choose a career for yourself that focuses on meeting those needs. You could choose one major in college over another based on thinking about that. Or if you don't go to college, you could pick one trade or line of business to invest your time and/or money in, or another. But, if you find yourself unable to control the way your life goes as much as you want, you can always work with whatever part of your life is under your control, and try to use that as effectively as you can. Maybe you can just focus on becoming a good friend or family member, because there is also a need for that.

(A long list of non-career ways to help.)

As a child, you may get the opportunity to work in the field that you feel

called to, or to practice doing good in some other way. That's good training, and does some good. But if not, you can at least read books, watch videos, etc. that help you prepare, and try to think deeply about what it would be like to do good.

--

p. 213 --Children often think outside the box of limited resources and time and encourage the church to engage in opportunities for service that may have been overlooked.--

This is part of the comparative advantage of children.

(Also mentioned on pp. 213 - 214 are children's abilities to do simple things (perform gestures or acts of care with simplicity), and by being children who communicate as an act of care, (my thought:) bearing the loadedness of "child", which means something to the recipient of care, a bit of connection with family, innocence, simple caring, etc.)

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Finished ch. 14

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Ch. 15

p. 229 --I believe that if we listen to children long enough and carefully enough, they too will tell us what they need. This kind of listening requires relationship. As we seek to welcome children, we cannot simply implement the right programs or find the perfect techniques. We must know children, and they must know us. Hospitality is a relational act, not a strategy. When we build trusting and respectful relationships with children, we may be surprised how insightful they can be about their own needs.--

(After a discussion of the author's father, who as a physician had a similar approach to diagnosing patients.)

I wonder if this works even more generally, that a kind of attention (a listening to and waiting on) reveals the deeper needs, at least in cultural / psychological / social / political type worlds. And similarly the requirement that we be in a relationship with the world we want to diagnose.

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Finished Ch. 15 / the book overall.

Labels: #book review, #childhood, #Christianity, #church, #education, #family

Morality as Cloud

%morality-as-cloud

Friday, September 23, 2022

Morality could be a cloud. It is constantly changing and is seen from many different angles. It is sometimes roiling and ready to put out lightning and hail. Other times it is light, complex, puffy, and calm, lit up by sunlight. Other times it is thin and even has a break that lets the sun through.

So people say different things about this cloud at different times, and say different things from different physical locations (in different countries). But, everyone sees a cloud. (That we all say "should" is us all seeing the same cloud, even if we disagree on what should be.)

Labels: #morality, #note

Indonesian Songs Translated

%indonesian-songs-translated

Friday, September 23, 2022

Earlier, I wrote about some Indonesian songs, "Anjeun", "Kalangkang", "Es Lilin" (the versions by Nining Meida), and "Cinta Melulu" by Efek Rumah Kaca. I intended to see what the songs meant when translated into English, and here is my attempt.

Overall, two out of three of Nining Meida's songs, recorded in the 1980s, are about love, and maybe the third ("Es Lilin") is as well. So love songs were nothing absolutely new in Indonesia when ERK released "Cinta Melulu". I assume ERK was more opposed to bad love songs or morally corrupting ones than artistically well-done or morally enlightening ones.

"Anjeun":

This song, and all the others by Nining Meida, is in Sundanese, a language spoken by one of the people groups of Indonesia. It's a relatively big people group, and so Google Translate has a translator for it. Also, there's a site called terjemahansunda.com that can translate Sundanese to many other languages.

I tried terjemahansunda.com and translate.google.com and neither of them has a function (or enough of a function, as far as I saw) to provide multiple meanings when words mean more than one. Without that, I don't think I can be an armchair translator very effectively. I don't intend to learn Sundanese any time soon, so I decided just to copy down the translate.google.com output, but it has some obvious problems, like untranslated words and seeming nonsense (things which such artists as Elizabeth Fraser and David Bowie might use, and some which in their way might work with the song, but others which sound like Mad Libs).

The song is more ambivalent than I would have guessed from the music.

--

There is no one to love except you
There is no one to worry about except you
The best in the world
the best in the world except you
Anu heman and daria
Who promised to be faithful only to you

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
I am happy to meet you

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
I'm sorry to be beside you
Just a little unfortunately

If you meet Osok, ask to rush
The base must be unknown
No, you've already...

= = =

There is no more

That's what you think
There is no more
who is happy except you
Inggis is allowed by others
Inggis loves someone else except you
Every night reading
Special sorting pellets for you
Oh, oh, oh,
Less eat less sleep thinking of you
Oh, oh, oh,
Want to be close
want to be close... Only with you
The base must be unknown
Send a letter with the wrong content
Bad luck and harm
Break up here and there...

= =

There is no more
Who loves except you
There is no more
Who cares except you

The best in the world
the best in the world except you
Anu heman and daria
who promised to be faithful only to you

Oh, oh, oh
I am happy to meet you
oh, oh, oh,
I'm sorry to be beside you

Just a little unfortunately
If you meet Osok, ask to rush
The base must be unknown

No, you've already...

"Es lilin"

I found the MIDI of "Es lilin" that I liked back in the day, and I now think that the part I liked was just the melody, which Nining Meida sings somewhat differently, so I thought the old melody had been an instrumental line added by the MIDI programmer. But it's a good MIDI, and the site for it is still up. There are a lot of Indonesian songs there in MIDI form.

Here is that site's version of the lyrics, translated through translate.google.com:

ice candle is eu-ceu
young coconut
helped me eu-ceu
to Majalaya

I'm sorry
I'm sorry
that there is a mistake

And here are the lyrics for Nining Meida's version:

The ice candle was pushed and pushed
I was helped by Sukajadi
I'm ashamed of my unexpected employer
I'm sorry it doesn't happen

Ice candles are made in Bandung
I took it to Cipaganti
I'm ashamed to be ashamed
I'm sorry it doesn't happen

That's who the boss is leading the buffalo
tied with a handkerchief
that's who is my employer too
the one who doesn't listen to me is better than jungjun

The ice candle is very light
it feels like a cabin
I am a wise employer
I'm always afraid of being taken anywhere

--

While working on this, I found a video on YouTube that translates the Sundanese lyrics of "Es Lilin" into Indonesian, so maybe there is some hope for me to someday find the meaning of "Es Lilin".

"Kalangkang"

This one turns out to make some sense as run through Google Translate. I think it does fit the spookiness of the music.

In the dream
It's so close
Kanyaaah is clean
Loyal as a lover...

In the dream
It's so cute
Sweet friendly face
Do not be ashamed

Long flowing hair
The hand is stretched out
Slowly face up
The hug felt tight

Above the sand flour geten
A symbol of blossoming love
The happiness of the two... the two

Unfortunately....it's too bad
It's just a shadow...
Hope ... hope .... SELF
That is in line with reality

"Cinta melulu"

Since this song was in Indonesian, I had more resources available, and I came up with a translation that is plausibly faithful to the song and also makes sense:

[Verse 1]
Nada-nada yang minor
-Tones that minor
Lagu perselingkuhan
-Adultery song
Atas nama pasar semuanya begitu klise
-On behalf of market [each other] [that way] cliche

[Minor key adultery song, cliches to make money]

[Verse 2]
Elegi patah hati
-Elegy breaks heart/mind
Ode pengusir rindu
-Ode repellent longing

Atas nama pasar semuanya begitu banal
-On behalf of market [each other] [that way] banal

[Elegies (beautiful, graceful, classy, stately songs) that break your heart / mind. Odes (similarly classy) of repellent longing. For commercial reasons, banal]

[Chorus]
Oh hoo
Lagu cinta melulu
-Mere love song
Kita memang benar-benar melayu
-We very really Malay
Suka mendayu-dayu
-like limp
Lagu cinta melulu
-Mere love songs

[We Malay people like limp songs that are merely love songs]

Kita memang benar-benar melayu
-We very really Malay
Suka mendayu-dayu
-like limp
Lagu cinta melulu
-Mere love songs

[(same)]

[(Lyrics repeat)]

Labels: #Efek Rumah Kaca, #Indonesia, #music, #Nining Meida, #romance

Book Review: On the Genealogy of Morality by Friedrich Nietzsche

%book-review-on-genealogy-of-morality-by

Monday, September 26, 2022

See also the preview for this review.

I read *On the Genealogy of Morality* by Friedrich Nietzsche as a way to understand the Long Reflection. I think it is a somewhat helpful book for that. I hope my notes give some indication of why that is true. (At least some) EAs (effective altruists) interested in the Long Reflection should read *Genealogy of Morality*.

Similarly, there is some value for (some) Christians or those concerned with Christianity to read *Genealogy of Morality*, again, as I hope my notes indicate.

Christianity as a whole and EA as a whole should take into account *Genealogy of Morality*.

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[Notes:]

p. xiv (Editor's (Keith Ansell-Pearson's) introduction) --The *Genealogy* is a subversive book that needs to be read with great care.--

p. xiv - xv --The critique of morality Nietzsche carries out in the book is a complex one; its nuances are lost if one extracts isolated images and concepts from the argument of the book as a whole.--

Unfortunately, I do not think I will be able to give this book that much attention. I will read it somewhat superficially.

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Read (Nietzsche's) preface.

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First essay:

up to end of section 4:

Nietzsche makes much of how "vulgar, common" becomes "bad" (the etymology of *schlect* in section 4). The aristocratic declare things beneath them, and this becomes "bad". But I'm not sure that aristocracy or something enough like it was the original state of human society. I'm much more certain that the family was, and that aristocracy itself arose out of family. I suppose a patriarch (or matriarch) and an aristocrat can be similar, but on a much different scale. In a small tribe, even a patriarch has to negotiate with his wife and (old-enough) kids, and generally can't be socially distant from them, will naturally in a sense love them despite whatever aristocratic leanings he has. Small tribes are effectively somewhat (or very?) democratic, even if explicitly patriarchal (I would think) because of this decrease in *distance* between rulers and ruled, to borrow Nietzsche's term in section 2. And, also, there were many tribes, and thus multiple different evolutions of morality. Supposing some families / tribes were patriarchal, and some more egalitarian, the genealogy of morality of the egalitarian tribes would be different from that of the patriarchal.

--

up to section 5:

I think, for me, personally, it is striking that Nietzsche connects truthfulness, reality, "being" with aristocracy, because I value truthfulness, reality, and "being real". I think if I could take "aristocracy" in a relatively unloaded way, I could be in favor of it, especially insofar as it is reconciled with democracy when all people are (in a sense) aristocratic (at least, truthful, real, "really existing").

--

section 7:

Nietzsche talks about the "priestly" vs. "aristocratic" classes. These classes emerge as families grow and become bizarre elaborations of themselves. (This is my theory:) The priestly represents the values of home. (Jacob hanging around the tents and pleasing his mother.) The aristocracy represents the values of not-at-home. (Esau going out to hunt and pleasing his father.) Mother, father, and siblings are a primal situation that is repeated over and over, like waves of the ocean crashing down on society. We have to solve the problems of parents raising siblings over and over, and for much of our early life, it dominates our experience of the world, and affects our later understanding of the world. So there are mother-values and father-values, and the values of raising children, and of children looking after their own interests and putting pressure on the family culture, and perhaps others. Both mother, father, and children/ siblings are needed to perpetuate family, which is the bringing of children to adulthood so that they can start their own families. This is the root

situation of the survival of the human species.

The "priests" and "aristocrats" take these impulses and run with them, creating the bizarre versions of them. But, to an extent, they still champion the values of mothers and fathers, respectively (maybe of mother-aligned children and father-aligned children, respectively). Nietzsche holds up the Jews as the haters of aristocratic values. I think "hate" is of limited accuracy, and is dangerously loaded, and similarly with saying "the Jews", but I can see in Judaism and its descendants a pressure against Nietzsche-style aristocracy. But, Judaism may be saying something like "You want to survive and flourish? You need 'maternal' values and we are going to champion them." So Nietzsche, if he wants human flourishing, even his version of human flourishing, needs the "maternal" (mothers, mother-aligned, even priests) to do cultural work that materially supports his "paternal" (fathers, father-aligned, aristocratic) agenda, somewhat like how a Democrat screenwriter needs a Republican plumber. A truthful accounting of patriarchy and aristocracy requires it to understand its dependence on the feminine and "lower class".

The Bible is ambivalent about Jacob, and there is a reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. And the Old Testament, and perhaps also the New with Jesus and Paul, is one male hero after another, serving the cause of these "Jewish"/"maternal" values.

--

Finished section 7.

To be fair to Nietzsche, there can be people who really hate aristocratic values (or, various values that Nietzsche calls "aristocratic"). It's possible for people to hate truthfulness and "real personality" somehow because they are championing "Jewish"/"maternal" values, or opposing certain aspects of how "aristocracy" oppresses people. Maybe he knew one or two of them personally, and saw the bitterness with how they hated who he was. Nietzsche's hate is a mirror image of the hate he saw in them.

So people who oppose the patriarchy can shoot themselves in the foot epistemically through their bitterness at what representatives of "men" have done to them. They can naively reject "patriarchal" values -- such as "truthfulness", "being real", being brave, being ambitious, not resenting, thus limiting themselves morally.

--

up to section 10

Nietzsche describes his noble people as "naive" and "complacent". They sound like big, happy children -- perhaps then they are unaware of reality and can be trolled by Satan. The noble sound sort of unserious to me. But

the people of *ressentiment* are more serious because their hate makes them serious. This drives them to cleverness. And in this, though they are not as "naive" or "complacent", they are also children, more mature children who are in some sense smaller and who are unhappy -- partially aware of reality, but still can be trolled by Satan. The complacent become hardened in the happiness of their complacency and thus are kept from truly having God's heart -- they do not see the need, despite their privilege, to really seriously love. The "resentful" hold onto hate, which prevents them from truly having God's heart. Everyone sees the opposite as being a problem, so they retreat to being themselves as salvation. But that is a mistake, at least in this case, because both the complacent and the resentful are on the wrong path. This "escape from other people's spiritual danger by affirming your own values" move is a way that Satan trolls us.

Perhaps "complacent" vs. "resentful" (or the more positive terms that can be associated with those two terms, like "forgiving" and "loving" respectively) are often enough two aspects of human psychology that each of us has -- no one (or few) are purely "noble"/"complacent" or "humble"/"resentful". We struggle with these conflicting values, in ourselves and each other. Perhaps each value seems called for (whether it really is or not) in its own season.

--

section 10 (at the end):

--Against this [the enemy of the noble who is respected by the noble], imagine 'the enemy' as conceived of by the man of *ressentiment* -- and here we have his deed, his creation: he has conceived of the 'evil enemy', '*the evil one*' as a basic idea to which he now thinks up a copy and counterpart, the 'good one' -- himself!--

I feel like a different genealogy of "good" could be, a mother takes care of, comforts, feeds, guides, and disciplines her children, and it makes them feel good (retrospectively in the case of the discipline) and makes their lives go well, which gives them a feeling of gratitude toward her. Gratitude is a feeling that things are good. So they associate goodness with her, and call her good. Her kind of goodness, coincidentally or not, resembles the goodness of Judaism and Christianity, which according to Nietzsche (section 8) grows out of their desire for revenge.

(I wonder if there are theories of developmental psychology on how we think infants and small children come to believe that their parents are trustworthy. It's easy to go from "I trust you" to "You are trustworthy", and for some meanings of the terms, "trustworthy" and "good" are identical. So maybe the genealogy of "good" is "I trust you and generally do not get betrayed through you", and this is "good", and "I trust you and too often get betrayed through you" is "bad" or "evil". That may be a simpler and

more elemental genealogy of morality or value.)

--

section 12

Nietzsche talks about moral progress, perhaps: --Today we see nothing that wants to expand, we suspect that things will just continue to decline, getting thinner, better-natured, cleverer, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian -- no doubt about it, man is getting 'better' all the time... Right here is where the destiny of Europe lies -- in losing our fear of man we have also lost our love for him, our respect for him, our hope in him and even our will to be man. The sight of man now makes us tired -- what is nihilism today if it is not *that*?... We are tired of *man*...--

From the perspective of the dominant culture (which to this day is into "better-naturedness", "cleverness", "comfort", perhaps also "indifference", often "Christian" as Nietzsche meant it), we get moral progress by furthering our own values. But from the perspective of Nietzsche, someone with different values, we are actually declining. So how are we supposed to know when we've had moral progress?

I can see both a taste for our dominant / "slave morality" culture in effective altruism (at least the traits mentioned in the previous paragraph as being current values), but also a driving desire for truth and excellence, at least in some sense. Is effective altruism conflicted in a deep way? Is it trying to destroy itself, using greatness to destroy the possibility of greatness (producing a maximally comfortable world)? If EAs recognized this conflict, would they bite the bullet and say that truth and excellence are only instrumental in bringing about comfort, or would they feel uneasy at pursuing comfort in a way that could sacrifice truth and excellence?

[By "truth" and "excellence", I think I mean something like "people value, practice, consciously embody seeking what is real and doing what is best". If you are maximally comfortable, I seem to be claiming, you no longer seek what is real or do what is best. Are EAs really trying to produce a world of maximal comfort? "EAs" is a broad category. I know that when people talk about moral foundations on the Forum, what feels like the most common guiding principle is hedonism. I feel like if you pursue hedonism as your guiding star, you will end up maximizing comfort at the expense of truth and excellence. Not that the world you produce won't in some sense bear the marks of truth and excellence if you are a hedonist. It will have a considerable amount, all the truth and excellence that *you* had in pulling off the difficult task of optimizing. Optimizing anything in any way takes truth and excellence of some sort in the optimizer. But people will be robbed of the opportunity to pursue truth and excellence themselves by the very success of hedonism as a guiding value. In any

case, some EAs very well might already see, or would see as soon as pointed out, the tension between hedonism and altruism, and be uneasy about hedonism. EAs might not, in many cases are not, consciously seeking to end human embodiment of truth and excellence. But, as long as hedonism is a "Schelling point" for moral action, I think in effect the EA "juggernaut" is heading in that direction. EA may simply be embodying the much greater juggernaut of society as a whole, which seems to me to be lumbering toward comfort for all and truth and excellence only for a few, or perhaps for no one.]

Can truth and excellence have a goal other than producing comfort and mediocrity? Perhaps Nietzsche's answer would be "if you conceive of excellence in non-altruistic terms, of course. Altruism forces us to 'make things better' for other people, and lends itself to moral circle expansion, so we end up making things better for everyone, and this needs to be cumulative, so we eventually run out of things to do, and have to sink back into comfort and mediocrity. But, if you go down my path, you can conceive of an eternity of petty warfare that never produces X-risks, in which people can be great by amorally conquering some people but not going so far (so *moralistically* far) as conquering the whole world)".

I think that an alternative to Nietzsche and what in fairness may not be a universal EA philosophy, but the one that I fear I see in EA or in the culture at large, -- which I suppose is my answer for the time being -- is to say that truth and excellence exist in order to make us true and excellent people, and that is the real altruism. When altruism accomplishes all that it has to accomplish, we will mourn the loss of great action, and in doing so value great action, which will never be ours again. This mourning is part of how we will not be mediocre. We will exist in a comfort, in a sense, but which we will not value as highly as the people who survive, and the people who survive will only be means to the end of loving God, the original person who is the moral truth.

--

section 13

Nietzsche uses some metaphysics/ontology to argue that power just wants to be power and do what it wants.

If I were to use metaphysics/ontology in reply, I would say that the most powerful beings are conscious of everything, and thus experience exploitation both as exploiter and exploited. And [I would say] that power comes from legitimacy -- if it were not legitimate, it wouldn't exist. So what Nietzsche thinks of as power, is less than real power. It is a kind of mediocrity, or perhaps a less-loaded word than "mediocrity" [applies,] that conveys a lack of rigorous excellence.

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section 17, note

In this note, Nietzsche gives a sort of manifesto for something somewhat like the Long Reflection, for instance:

--The question: what is this or that table of values and 'morals' *worth*? needs to be asked from different angles; in particular, the question 'value for *what*?" cannot be examined too finely. Something, for example, which obviously had value with regard to the longest possible life-span of a race (or to the improvement of its abilities to adapt to a particular climate, or to maintaining the greatest number) would not have anything like the same value if it was a question of developing a stronger type. The good of the majority and the good of the minority are conflicting moral standpoints: we leave it to the naïvety of English biologists to view the first as higher in value as *such*... *All* sciences must, from now on, prepare the way for the future work of the philosopher: this work being understood to mean that the philosopher has to solve the *problem of values* and that he has to decide on the *rank order of values*.--

Earlier in the note, Nietzsche talks about how the physical sciences (such as physiology) are needed to answer questions about what where morality comes from.

Should the Long Reflection take into account genealogy of morality, or physiology? Nietzsche thinks that doing so helps a philosopher "decide on" (willfully determine?) values. Why know what you're doing when you're making up values? Why do research? If you're discovering values rather than just making them up, I can see a point to doing research. Does genealogy of morality, or physiology, have anything to do with what moral *should* be? Can we get an "ought" from those "is"es? I think we can get an "ought" from an "is" through the ontology of morality. If morality (I would call it "legitimacy") is a thing which exists, then maybe we can learn its nature and thus have an idea what morality should be. If we know some things that are true of all existing beings, or of the beings in the categories that morality would belong to, then that gives us a clue to the nature of morality, and therefore of what matters.

Can the Long Reflection meaningfully make any progress from another starting point? If morality isn't a "thing out there", isn't it fully made up by people? (In which case research doesn't matter -- it's all a contest of preferences.) Maybe it's programmed into our biology or culture, but those are up for revision, at least they should be in the future.

I guess I would say from those thoughts that the Long Reflection shouldn't bother with any research other than into the ontology of morality, and what follows from that investigation. (Maybe "ontology" is the wrong word, but what I have in mind is the investigation of morality as a being that exists, and how it could be, could have its own particular kind of

power, etc.)

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Second essay

(up to end of section 9)

In this essay, Nietzsche describes his theory that morality came out of people punishing other people so that they would pay their debts. The pain of punishment is a reminder to pay back debts. The creditors get to feel sadistic pleasure (a "primitive" and therefore "original" and "natural" thing) in punishing people, being cruel to them. This gets "internalized" as bad conscience.

Supposing Nietzsche is correct (or correct-enough), does this matter? Maybe justice is built up out of this history? But *I* can see justice, myself, in this moment. The history may have taught it to my ancestors, and how else could they have been taught justice or any other part of morality, if they didn't understand innately? We somehow have to "teach children to care". But when we are taught things, we might be shown a crude sketch of a concept, but then somehow from that our minds can leap to the real concept. The sketch is not what we noetically perceive, but instead, the concept itself. So *I*, myself, see justice, *now*, and must grapple with it.

Nietzsche might presuppose that justice couldn't exist in itself (too Platonic or Christian an idea, maybe), but how did he know that? Why couldn't he be wrong, and *I* be right? I see what I see.

Perhaps I can see wrongly. But to some extent, I live in the world that I live in, and so I have to live with the justice that exists in my world. Ultimately, before any debunking can happen, I have to trust myself and my contact with the world enough to think through the debunking and trust it as true. My relationship to what I directly perceive, whether noetically or with my senses, is my primary reality. It's true that I can see with my sensory eyes a mirage, or with my noetic eyes something equivalent, but I get real evidence by seeing justice, no matter how justice was pointed out to me.

[I guess I'm trying to say that genealogies don't automatically debunk direct lived experience. They both offer some "evidence". These evidences are provisional, they "might be mirages" (which applies to all evidence and all foundations of thinking). But I can viscerally interact with the justice that exists to me, in my lived life, and this gives me reason to believe in that justice, unless there is some kind of defeater. Maybe justice is a cloudy thing, but even then, I may see it truly in my naive life.]

[Another way to look at the genealogy-debunking issue is to say that if we have sufficient evidence that God does (or for a weaker but still somewhat

effective version, might with significant likelihood) exist, then this may move us toward, or effectively all the way to, thinking that justice is a thing that existed before human history, and was taught to us, ultimately by God though possibly with others involved, by "whatever means worked", including something "gory" like what Nietzsche talks about, if Nietzsche turns out to be correct (or correct-enough).]

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Finished the second essay.

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Third essay.

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Nietzsche talks about how people turn on themselves, and then become unhealthy and evil. They pretend to be humble, but are actually resentful. They spread their sickness and make the healthy sick.

I think Nietzsche makes a good diagnosis. (But I would amend it by saying that people both pretend and sincerely attempt to be humble, but are actually resentful. And perhaps resentment and dishonesty is not always present, but more generally there is a self-enmity that wants people to be enemies of themselves, which produces unhealthiness.) I can see what he says in the church (or something like it), even to this day, or perhaps among people who are fearful -- even in myself.

Church people might be worried that if they accept Nietzsche's diagnosis, they will have to accept his cure, which would involve atheism. But maybe there is another cure, which is theistic.

Naively, I would say simply reading the Gospels dispels the unhealthiness that Nietzsche disliked. Going to church is a good place to catch the sickness, but reading the Gospels is a cure. I wonder how many unhealthy Christians really sit down to read the Gospels.

But perhaps with a sufficiently committed ideology of sickness, the Gospels can't be read for what I naively think they are: the contact of a healer with people he makes whole, who is on the side of people, and wants them to be on the side of themselves, just as he is on their side. Maybe we always need God in the way that we always need his oxygen, but there is a sense in which God builds us up to not need him -- I would say, so that instead of pursuing (or remaining loyal to) him because we need him, we pursue him (remain loyal) because we love him.

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Up to section 20.

Nietzsche provides an eloquent attack against a certain kind of (often-Christian) culture. He can only speak with such strength (I will say) because he is in a minority, and has his own frustrated desire built up in him, which comes out in a concentrated form.

What would it sound like for someone who was in a minority within a more or less Nietzschean culture? How might such a person criticize Nietzsche? I'm fairly ignorant of past writings, and I bet there are quite a few of these, but I can't think of any off the top of my head. Being opposed to people in power goes back at least as far as the biblical prophets.

(I think aspects of my book *How Can We Love?* came out of my time in a sort-of-Nietzschean culture. (For instance, the protest against "lovelessness".) Now I would like to side with Nietzsche against certain anti-Nietzscheans. There's something wearying in this -- is there a point to knowing things to the point of having opinions, if you take the opposite side later on? I don't think that my pro- and anti-Nietzschean sides are exact opposites, but there's still a weariness to that. Maybe weariness stops us from going on, maybe without having reached an answer, or it causes us all the more to reach an answer, with the strength we have left.)

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Finished third essay (and the whole book).

In section 27, there's mention made of the questionability of the will to truth. Nietzsche thinks that rigor of thinking is a descendant of asceticism (Christianity). He seems to want to go against truth itself as a value.

Going against truth entirely is not practical, although in some "utopia" of the future it might be possible. But being lax with the truth to some extent could work. We're already lax, in practice, and survive, or even do better for it in some ways.

For the Long Reflection, we could ask "is it a sin to more, or less, intentionally deceive yourself?" If the answer is "no" or "we don't know" (which I think may be the case for atheists, unless they have an atheistic moral realism), then people can hold values completely regardless of reason. Or, all they need is the little bit of reason that says "I don't have to respect the will to truth" and they can believe whatever they like. Can we reject their beliefs for not respecting the will to truth? Maybe -- if we can prove that the will to truth is necessary. Or maybe we would say that correct moral beliefs conform to reality, and we need truth to know reality. But why do we need to espouse correct moral beliefs, and not simply the ones that reflect our wills and preferences? Could we maybe say that truth is particular rather than universal, and so each person has their own particular moral truth, which they know directly through experience, and, "reflection" in some sense?

Nietzsche's argument (I think) includes that the truly atheistic person goes beyond the atheism of his day (which I think he would see in the rationalists / EAs as well) which wasn't thoroughgoingly atheistic, but still sort of held to theistic beliefs without having a good reason for them. So, moral anti-realism which still ends up compelling action -- it sounds like there used to be a God, who compelled action, then we replaced him with morals, then with a moral anti-realism which claims to not be moral realism but which works like moral realism. Similarly with the love of truth. Nietzsche (I think) would say to most modern atheists: you aren't really atheists, you are still infected with theism. But the modern atheist has one foot in the theistic world, and one foot in the atheistic.

Labels: #book review, #Christianity, #Friedrich Nietzsche, #Long Reflection, #morality, #truth

Endless Grad School

%endless-grad-school

Monday, September 26, 2022

This post was drafted at about the same time as Cultural Altruism (Hubs), while hypomanic, and while I do endorse its basic ideas, I feel like in a way it doesn't represent me.

Would it be possible to create an alternative to academia for Christian (or maybe many other kinds of) scholarship?

[This post doesn't really get into anything specifically Christian.]

Academia is expensive, time-consuming, and imposes a culture of professionalism and careerism on people in it. People get PhDs, a huge investment of time, effort, and money, but then can't get jobs that use that education. If you love ideas and facts for their own sakes, you might throw yourself at the process (of higher education) like an artist, and be left paying for it for years to come.

Further, from my limited personal experience, I think that the pinnacle of an intellectual social life is grad school, with undergrad and being a professor tied for second place. (I have been an undergraduate, and spent a lot of time around a grad school department, observing both grad students and professors.)

Also, I have heard it mentioned by defenders of higher education (for instance, Alice Cappelle in one of her YouTube videos on higher education) that there is something that do-it-yourself scholarship lacks, rigor. Do you know how to do good research? This is something you might not be able to figure out on your own. Also, it's true that formal education can help you to write papers which will meet the minimum bar for publication in academic journals.

Another advantage of traditional higher education is access to sources. Maybe the university pays for access to a bunch of paywalled sources and lets the students have access "for free". Or maybe there are books that can only be read if you know someone who can get you access (I'm sort of making up this example) and you access that person by being part of some official research job you get through the university.

And relatedly, at a university, you meet people who can help you "get somewhere" as a scholar.

I am somewhat of an outsider to this topic, so my ideas may have flaws that I am unaware of, but here are some thoughts for how, starting with

the above considerations, it might be possible to avoid formal higher education and still be a scholar.

I would start with the idea of "endless grad school" -- endless grad school without any time pressures. ("No deadlines, no degree, no debt.") For this, you need to bring together other like-minded people. Two layers: online and in-person. Pick a city to make into a "endless grad school" hub, and maybe a part of that city to focus on. Try to get all the unattached people to move there. For the online component, maybe use existing networks like Twitter, or make your own forum.

In this endless grad school, you will have to have a day job (just like regular grad school, for some people). You will also have to teach new people the research skills and paper-writing techniques that you learned in traditional academia, or which have been handed down within the endless grad school. You will meet in person (or online) and talk about things. You will be an amateur, and not a professional, but, a serious amateur, capable of getting papers published. (Grad school is the confluence of seriousness and amateurism. Undergrads are less serious amateurs, and professors are serious but less amateur.)

Amateurism is a good thing. You don't want to lose your amateurism. Amateurism connects you with what really matters.

You could enter endless grad school after getting a master's or PhD. Hopefully you would not have too much debt that way. Can a master's or PhD pay off your debt? Maybe not, if you can't get a job in academia. If you have to have a day job, why not have one in a place where you can be part of endless grad school, and make endless grad school your passionate hobby and social life?

Or, you could skip regular grad school and go straight to endless grad school. What would be the disadvantages of that? Maybe you would lack credentials. Well, if you don't have credentials, what do you lose? Maybe some journals won't read your articles? Why do you need to be published in a journal? To get tenure? It's true that professors are well-paid (I think, compared to the average American) and can pursue scholarship full-time. To be a professor, you do need credentials. And you have to play politics and get into status games, and network, and so on. But at endless grad school, you can dispense with all of that, get a day job, and pursue your passions. If you want a job in academia, as a professor, maybe you can get it. But in some fields, your chances aren't that great. So just take a load off and go to endless grad school, unless you really want to play the game.

Will your work not be heard by other people? Maybe, but who cares? I personally am an altruistic-oriented person and couldn't let myself pursue work that didn't have an altruistic edge to it if I could help it. But I am also an artist and intellectual and so if I couldn't figure out some way to be

altruistic through art or thinking, I would have a conflict, and probably end up still pursuing art and thinking, but maybe somewhat less. If you're an artist or intellectual, you are stuck with your obsessions and delights, and you have to make the best of your life. So, pursue thinking for thinking's sake (ideas, facts, truth, for their own sake), and just try to do the best job you possibly can, and don't worry about worldly success.

If you are altruistically minded, and are weighing where you can have the greatest impact, I can make a case for endless grad school maybe being good at some things that academia is bad at. In endless grad school, your only motivation is to do things that are interesting. You don't have to "publish or perish". You can try bold new ideas, risking nothing but your own free time. You can remain in touch with the world, by preserving your amateur spirit for decades and decades, surrounded by fellow amateurs who keep the fires alive.

Dogmatism (one definition) is when on a very deep level you are no longer indexing yourself to reality, to what is but might be otherwise than you understand it to be. Becoming a professional is to have become who you are going to be for the rest of your life, to turn your mind and flow of work into a tool that can be articulated with the demands of a mechanized / "economized" society. But an amateur can keep looking to what is going on, and can keep learning new things and becoming a new person, and in this way stay in tune with reality. It's unfortunate that the most trusted people in our society are professionals, who on many levels are competent to speak, but who on the deepest levels have lost touch with reality.

Dogmatism, pattern-boundness, wisdom, is effective, and 90% of the time is better than radical freedom, random thinking, and naivete. But you have to understand (something I learned from We Are Not Saved) that being really good at the 90% of things that don't really matter, but missing the critical thing in the 10%, is a good way for society to die, in the long run. Plenty of people are betting on the 90%, but can we have better (higher quality or quantity) of pursuit of the things that only pay off 10% of the time? Probably we need to have communities of amateurs.

Why would scholarship matter so much? When I say "scholarship", I'm thinking of things that go into culture: studies of religion, politics, history, criticism, some philosophy, maybe others. Reading old books, figuring out the more or less right way to think about the culture of the past (or ruling out wrong ways). Or ideas about where to take culture, what kinds of "speeches to give". In some ways, the altruistic / world-changing side of this is obvious (like when you influence public policy). But there is a lot of work done in these areas that is of tenuous connection to things like "are people starving?" or "are people going to heaven?". Amateurs in endless grad school could think of the ways in which there can be "spiritual X-risks", or other bad outcomes, if culture goes the wrong way. They could think about the far future of culture, and also about the ways to apply the

resources of existing scholarship (and of the things that scholarship looks at) to try to focus on those basic altruistic questions ("are people starving?" "are people going to heaven?"). These are roles that I am not sure the existing academic system pursues or incentivizes well.

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I'm not sure about the paywalled sources. It may be cheaper to pay for paywalled sources as an independent researcher than to pay off student debt. I will concede that there are probably some special sources that can only be accessed through the academic system (perhaps rare papyri that haven't been digitized, or something like that).

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I don't know if this post introduces a lot of new ideas that humanities scholars haven't thought of before. Except, maybe articulating scholarship with altruism. I would guess that humanities scholars may have even thought "what if there was some place we could all live and pursue our humanities pursuits for the rest of our lives?" I assume the reason why a hub for non-academic scholarship doesn't exist is partly due to lack of coordination. Are there any really advantageous places to locate such a hub? For the very related topic of "cultural altruism", which might be a superset of Christian scholarship (and many other kinds of humanities scholarship), I thought of what I feel (tentatively) is a strong candidate for such a location. You can read about that here.

Labels: #altruism, #cultural altruism, #culture, #education, #humanities, #life choices, #Long Reflection

Cultural Altruism (Hubs)

%cultural-altruism-hubs

Monday, September 26, 2022

(...some kind of...) status: I drafted much of this under the influence of hypomania, to the extent that I don't feel like it belongs to me, and I probably won't follow up on it. But maybe other people will see its value for themselves.

Writing about endless grad school makes me think of local hubs. The effective altruists discuss this on the EA Forum.

One thing that the effective altruists don't do (yet, as far as I know) is try to work with culture. They do some movement building, and that does get their values out in the world. But they are more focused on more "tangible" things.

I am personally more interested in culture. I think that's a more natural thing for a religious person to care about than for a secular person. Most EAs are secular.

Cultural altruism would try to understand culture deeply, find the best values, and find effective ways to spread those values. The spreading of those values would be a good in itself, and downstream of them, there would often be other goods. For instance, patience is good in itself, but also produces people who endure and don't react too much to the present moment, which enables them to make long-lasting institutions.

There would be secular goods that came out of cultural altruism. For instance, designing cultures that kept people from choosing anti-natalism, from apathy with regard to X-risk prevention, or from wireheading. A very normatively-uncertain EA might not want to lock in any of their values, thinking that we need a "Long Reflection" to be very, very sure that we have the right ones. But, if we all die before we can engage in that, presumably we are pretty sure there would be no value at that point for anyone to find valuable, or no valuers to find anything valuable. So we at minimum want to bias culture away from things like anti-natalism and apathy with regard to X-risk prevention. And maybe we would think that no rational Long Reflection would yield wireheading as the best outcome for humanity, but it could be something that "just happens" to emerge in our society due to cultural drift. And there are other secular goods, like caring for animals and the environment, which might be threatened by cultural evolution and which cultural altruism could protect. If you're passionate about something now, it makes sense to try to make sure other people are passionate about it, and will be in the long run.

[This post is one that I may link outside this blog. For those from outside, "MSLN" is a natural-theological religious and ethical worldview that I work to develop.]

There would be religious goods. Speaking for MSLN, some goods are preventing hardening; increasing people's love for God; from a more Biblical perspective, connecting people to the God of the Bible so that they love him completely. Just like civilization as a whole, the Church can evolve into better or worse states, from both a secular and a religious or theistic perspective. (In this paragraph, I've focused on Christianity, but in principle cultural altruism could be an interesting pursuit for people from other religions or spiritual traditions.)

Cultural altruism would be a topic. Topics create scenes of interested people, some of whom come to the discussion with fundamental disagreements about values. Multiple different social movements can take up the topic of cultural altruism and thereby participate in the scene of the topic of cultural altruism.

Disagreement is good to prevent Tower of Babel-like scenarios, and scenes are good ways to harbor disagreement. An intentionally self-critical organization might sound like it could be as good as a scene for avoiding blind spots. Maybe better in that it can intentionally avoid blind spots, and scenes lack intentionality on some levels. The advantage of scenes are that they allow individuals to participate but still stand outside any social ties. Scenes can consist of both organizations and individuals.

Cultural altruism as a social thing could be viewed in a somewhat abstract way as having a "Meta" dimension and a "Partisan" dimension. The Meta dimension consists of the institutions (shared expectations), social spaces, people, organizations, etc. that work to make it so that cultural altruism is "one thing" that interrelates. Including something like "we are all human beings who communicate with each other in one community of people in order to arrive at some kind of essential unity in our beliefs, practices and so on". The Partisan dimension consists of the institutions, social spaces, people, organizations, etc. that are sold out to one particular view of reality, and which work to remain unconvinced of other points of view, or even to convert all other points of view to their own.

(Another view of "meta" vs. "partisan", taken from my notes:)

> Metans work cooperatively, politely, prosocially, ideally in a coordinated way, agnostic about values, agnostic about methods, inclusive, emphasis on coming to know the truth, opposed to conflict. Partisans are those who want things to be true, or know them to be true but can't explain them to other people yet, or care enough about things to be rude, anti- or asocial, disregarding coordination or consensus, believing in

> values even if they are unpopular or go against all people being in one harmonious body, emphasizing the truth that is already known and which might be denied by other people in culture war.

One might naively think that the Meta view is the only valid view, and that it is right for us to converge on it directly (optimize for unity, or for the smooth operation of the cultural altruism process, instead of the truth), but it could be the case that one of the Parties is much more in tune with the reality of what ought to be than everyone else, and it would be a huge mistake to turn the Meta view into a Party of its own, suppressing what was actually the right party.

Most people and organizations end up somewhere between Meta and Partisan. Both dimensions are needed and even if we as a culture feel fairly confident and safe in our future / eventual ethical/religious worldview, we should have the discipline to be open to finding out that we are wrong, and thus encourage people to form opposition Parties and to be Partyless critics. Even if we are right, we should be concerned that we might be wrong. We should always feel a virtuous kind of fear.

(Why not say "Meta" and "Mesa" or "Liberal" and "Partisan"? I think that the culture that would say "Meta"/"Mesa" is more in tune with "Meta" vibes and values, and the culture that would say "Liberal"/"Partisan" is more in tune with "Partisan" vibes and values.)

A hub would be a favorable place to site the scene of cultural altruism. In some ways, the Internet is ideal as a hub for that scene (in parallel to how the EA Forum, or Twitter, or whatever else, can be a low-cost, asynchronous, global hub). But in-person scenes have their virtues. For some reason, Silicon Valley, which is made of tech companies, still finds being physically located in the Bay Area to be essential, rather than becoming a purely online presence. I think the Internet is good at providing information on-demand, but is relatively bad at connecting people to each other, so that they can expand each other's minds or find each other's values (as lived out) more deeply compelling than they did before, because of their personal contact. Also, culture is not just what we read or can watch or listen to on our computers (text, images, audio, video and whatever else computers are well-suited to conveying), but also what kind of body language we use, what kinds of semi-intentional responses we make to what people say in the moment, the subtle look of fear, deadness, or delight that is "in our eyes", the kinds of interpersonal bonds we form, physical touch, the way we move together through environments and so on, which computers are not as well-suited to conveying. A cultural hub should be a scene for interested thinkers (or doers) to practice their observation of culture on other people around them, but also on each other. This way, they can understand the full meaning of their own beliefs

about which values are good and how to seek those values.

That paragraph raises the possibility of very high quality virtual reality making the physical location of social hubs irrelevant. I don't really know how long it will take for a sufficiently high quality virtual reality to exist, but, maybe it will come about soon, and make locality less relevant. I think that even if I had a really high quality VR headset, I would want to take it off because it was a headset, and also would want to interact with people in my physical environment because, why not? We could view VR and "regular reality" as both being streams of experience (something my basically Berkeleian worldview is sympathetic to) and even in many ways indistinguishable, but I have a "default reality" which I always can connect to ("regular reality"), and which I always have around, and which I can't change as easily as my "optional realities" (VRs). So I'm still localized to some extent. I don't know how that affects considerations of where to locate a hub. Maybe it mostly affects what kinds of people I live with. But then, the people I live with and I could like to live in a place where our near neighbors were a certain way, and then we could find those near neighbors in some place (region, city, town, camp, etc.), and then we get a thicker form of locality and maybe enough to make discussions of physically-located cultural hubs matter.

(I can see physical locality being a scarcer and more expensive good which is spent to form connections with people who are more special to us.)

[Maybe the cultural altruists would themselves form a people group and want to have their own locality. I guess this could cut against their cosmopolitanism. But, I would guess that cultural altruism, like being a missionary, is a role that has specific demands, one of which is both a connection with and alienation from established cultures, perhaps all established cultures (being a "third culture" person). So it might make sense for cultural altruists to lend each other support by identifying with each other and forming more committed bonds.]

We might think of cultural altruism as a basically rational thing. So, we examine many different cultures, decide -- are persuaded -- which premises to accept as valid, and then apply sound reasoning to produce an overall view of cultural truth.

I like to think of reason as the interrelationship of all truths. For me, that is done both rationally and intuitively, and the valid data points / pieces of evidence / starting premises for rational/intuitive reason can both be put into words, and not. We gather some of our intuitive premises by interacting with other beings who intuit (humans, or even sometimes animals), absorbing their intuitions intuitively. This may require physical presence. (Maybe not, maybe 100% of this kind of intuition is transmitted through sense experience, which sufficiently good VR can effectively simulate?)

Where would I locate a hub for cultural altruism? Well, I'm not much of a researcher, so I will make the case for where I currently live, and if anyone cares about this topic, they can make the cases for other places and see if any of them seem like clear winners. Then, if there are any people who want to move to those places, they can, and help form the hub.

A hub would at minimum have people living close enough to each other to see each other face to face if they want to. They might build institutions on top of the hub (startups, art groups, educational groups, religious groups, scenes, etc.) if there are enough people and occasion.

A hub should have some way to enter it. For instance, one or more guest houses (perhaps group houses that are guest houses) for people who want to visit, or who want to move there but need to look around for a place to move to.

Perhaps a hub needs some other kind of minimum infrastructure.

A cultural altruism hub would most ideally have a connection to all cultures, past, present, future, in all parts of the world, integrating all of these cultures into its own understanding of what culture should be, and then having an outlet into all the cultures of the present and future world; connecting people face to face to accomplish all of the above. Past cultures accessed through history, archaeology, or other study. Present cultures through face to face contact and media. Future cultures through imagination and educated guessing.

Nowhere on Earth could be that ideal place. But, there could be places that have their advantages in pursuing that ideal, and which could be more ideal than others, making for natural sites for hubs.

Cultural altruism hub in San Diego

(This develops into something more like "cultural altruism hub involving Los Angeles, San Diego, Tijuana, Imperial Valley, Mexicali, Mexicali Valley".)

San Diego is a sleepy place, but has the amenities of a medium-sized American city. I have sometimes wished it were a more passionate place, but what it lacks in passion it makes up for (maybe) in not having distractions. To me it feels like "nothing is going on". Silicon Valley is a hub for technology, LA is a hub for movies and music, New York City is a hub for theater, literature, finance, etc., Boston has a lot of universities, Washington, D.C. has the federal government, Nashville has music. Further, there are places like Portland, OR, and Austin which are "cool places for young people to go and hang out in". (For some reason I don't hear about Chicago but it's probably more exciting than San Diego.)

San Diego (so I read recently) has the largest concentration of US military

servicemembers in the US. I'm not sure exactly what that means, but the military is big here. That could count as a distraction for some, or as an opportunity for others, in culturally altruistic work. I don't feel like most culturally-inclined people are into the military that much. By contrast, I could see cultural altruists getting caught up in movies, music, theater, literature, universities, government / politics, and maybe finance and technology. And certainly in "hanging out" like in Portland or Austin.

San Diego is a place that to me feels like a sunset, that mixture of the end of time and endless time that comes at the end of a day. That might be a very subjective, personal thing, but it makes me feel far-sighted, and that vibe might be good for cultural altruism, if it has a longtermist dimension to it.

(Someone from San Diego I used to know said that when he came back to San Diego to visit, he felt a kind of sadness in San Diego.)

I feel like San Diego is a cultural backwater, and that may be helpful for people who need to get away from the present moment and think deeply.

To the west is the Pacific Ocean, which I think has a big influence on San Diego. If you've ever been to the beach and came away with the feeling that the crashing waves make in you, sort of quieted inside, that's a thing that influences San Diego whenever people get back from the beach. The weather is also mild, because of the ocean.

To the east is the mountains and then desert. The mountains are small and manageable as far as mountains go, so it's not hard to make it to the desert. There is affordable semi-desert land about an hour east by car (last I checked a few years ago). (If you need to build your own retreat center, for instance.) There is a desert influence over the city because it often enough has warm or hot dry weather, sometimes hot, dry winds.

While San Diego may be sleepy, there is excitement to the north and south. Los Angeles is a cultural capital. Tijuana is in another country, a developing country (although a higher-income one), is Spanish-speaking instead of English-speaking, and has issues with drug cartels. LA is about two or three hours away. Tijuana is about 30 min to enter, and a few hours to return from, plus whatever moving around you have to do in Mexico.

(According to one site, the highest average crossing time, when returning from Tijuana is 120 min. at 8AM. [One sampled day sometime between April and August 2022, not sure if it's typical.])

Spiritual/religious: San Diego has a reputation as having a nice vibe. Los Angeles does not have a nice vibe. I don't know about Tijuana, since I haven't been there in a long time. Nice vibes connect with nice spirits, for whatever that's worth. San Diego is a fairly religious place. I think along

with LA it's the most religious major city on the West Coast. I have casually run into Osho adherents, various kinds of Eastern meditation / martial arts / medicine etc. practitioners, New Age people, Western Buddhists, one or possibly two occult people. I visited Oakland a few years ago and found myself casually running into evidence of a political scene, and I think someone in San Diego might similarly be impressed by evidence of a East/West religious/spiritual fusion scene.

While I have run into Muslims and Baha'is in San Diego, they are not as prominent, and I haven't had much experience with Hindus. I have never encountered a Sikh in San Diego. There are Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses (I put them in this paragraph because some people don't count them as Christian.) There are two main Jewish neighborhoods that I know of.

The Christians in San Diego do not strike me as being above-average in passion or conviction. Whether this reflects more a real spiritual lack or more the "cultural weather", I don't know. (I'm not sure that anything in San Diego is above-average in passion or conviction, at least emotionally -- so if you are going to be passionate or convicted here, you will go farthest by channeling it through something else, like focus or persistence.) I tend to think that the world is less passionate than it should or could be, and this includes San Diego.

(I don't have enough experience with the other religions, to say in their case.)

San Diego has some cultural resources. Balboa Park is sort of like our Central Park, with museums and lots of random spaces worked into it for different activities. It has four fairly large universities, complete with university libraries (SDSU, UCSD, USD, and CSU San Marcos). It has the Athenaeum Music and Arts Library, a private library open to members; membership not too hard to afford. The public library system is adequate. You can check out university library books through the public library system. There are a few used bookstores.

I'm not as much into art or dance, so I don't know how it compares to other places in that regard. I've heard that it is something like a decent regional theater city.

Popular art/entertainment wise, if you really want to go out, there's usually something to do, and major bands usually have a stop here. The open mic scene used to be fairly strong, before the pandemic, but I think is not so strong right now. There is one "major league" team (baseball), and some "minor league" level professional sports. San Diego may be a real center of craft beer and Southern California-style Mexican food. There are a decent number of cafes.

There are a number of immigrant communities. I'm guessing mostly the

same as in other US cities. (I've run into Middle Eastern, East African, other African, some Carribbean, Southeast Asian, East Asian, Mexican and Central American, other Latin American, Russian, Pacific Islander, and Indian.) Some of these have noticeable cultural presences (radio stations, festivals, businesses).

There is an African-American community. I would guess that it is of average vibrancy and size as compared to other US cities of the same size. [It is big / vibrant enough to support a weekly print newspaper (*San Diego Voice and Viewpoint*), and another online periodical (*San Diego Monitor News*).]

There are American Indians / Native Americans. There are some reservations in the back country. [They may sometimes have public events going on or other ways to interact with them.]

San Diego used to be more conservative than liberal, but it has been shifting "blue" and strikes me as a basically moderate place. It shouldn't be too hard to find liberals (in the "vote Democrat" sense) and conservatives ("vote Republican") as well as moderates and apolitical people. I don't think San Diego is the best place to find intellectualized politics (like the kind of people who care a lot about the distinction between "left" and "liberal" or between "neoconservative" and "paleoconservative") although I would guess there are some people one could find here who are into that.

As mentioned above, there is a large military presence.

San Diego is definitely a car-oriented place. Traffic isn't too bad (better than LA). It is possible to get around via mass transit if you have a lot of time on your hands. Walking isn't too bad, if you have the time, although there are some areas (like I would guess in most American cities) that were not very well-designed for pedestrians.

Cost of living is fairly high, (although not as high as in the Bay Area or New York), so if you were to move here, you would hopefully find a job with high-enough wages. It's possible to get by on SSI in San Diego (~ $1,000 a month), if you're thrifty (and maybe adventurous). $20,000 to $25,000 might be a more realistic budget for what you spend on yourself each year, if you're living a simple but reasonable lifestyle.

(There are probably things I'm missing.)

Practical summary so far: San Diego combines the amenities of a medium-sized metro area with a sleepy vibe and a certain distance from where "things are happening". There are probably other places in the US like it. Where it might have an advantage on other such places is its access to Los Angeles and Tijuana. In San Diego, one can look to the farther future. In LA, to the present or nearer future and to part of the cultural industry. In Tijuana, a taste of the developing world. This does strike me as a pretty

strong combination, which might make San Diego a contender for a hub for cultural altruism.

Applications to other cities: Some similar places that stand out in my mind: Montreal (French, English, sort of close to New York City (~6 hrs by car), may be easier to immigrate to than US), somewhere in the Balkans (Orthodox, Catholic, secular, Muslim, somewhere between developed and developing), somewhere in India (Hindu, different kinds of Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Muslim, developing world) -- maybe in or near Mumbai as a parallel to Los Angeles. (San Diego has secular, Catholic, Protestant, Anglophone, Latin American, developed, developing.)

Some other major cultures maybe not covered by San Diego plus the above: Chinese, Japanese, Buddhist, Taoist, African, especially African tribal, Aborigine, maybe others. It depends on how strong of representation you want. San Diego has some Chinese, Japanese, Buddhist, Taoist, African, possibly some African tribal although maybe not. But not necessarily a really strong presence of any of those (as far as I've seen casually), compared to other parts of the world.

(Where Singapore meets Malaysia, there's a significant binational, developed-developing boundary. According to Wikipedia, Malaysia is majority-Muslim, with a significant Buddhist minority (and Christianity, Hinduism, and Chinese folk religions between 10% and 1%). Singapore has a Buddhist plurality, and significant secular, Christian, and Muslim minorities, (and Taoism and Hinduism between 10% and 1% each). *** It sounds pretty good for a hub location, except I'm not sure about freedom of speech / freedom to proselytize which the US is pretty good at, and I think probably Mexico as well. Cultural altruism might engage in troublesome speech, or directly pursue, or accidentally seem to pursue, activities that amount to proselytizing, on some level. Wikipedia makes it seem that Singapore is okay with religions "propagating" themselves, and Cru (Christian evangelical organization) has a public website for their efforts there. Cultural altruism could certainly have political and social dimensions and the government of Singapore could conceivably not like that or suppress that. It looks like Malaysia is a secular state that defines its majority population (Malays) as Muslim, and as recently as 2012 there were tensions over fears that Christians might be converting Malays. So Malaysia might be a riskier place to site a cultural altruism hub. *** However, San Diego (and to a lesser extent LA) may be biased by its blanket of safety. A "blanket of riskiness" might be a good influence on the kind of multidisciplinary thinking and relating that a cultural altruism hub engages in, to balance out a kind of overly-chill and/or timid SoCal/US vibe. (Tijuana helps to balance this out, but maybe not as strongly as other parts of the world.)) I feel like I'm going beyond my intuitions in recommending Singapore-Malaysia, like I'm not making a serious suggestion, but that feeling may significantly or entirely come from my

integration into the San Diego / USA / Western *habitus* that I'm used to responding to. *** As noted later in this post, Singapore may be more open to visiting (not requiring visa) than the US or even Mexico.)

(Indonesia, at least superficially, looks interesting. The national ideology (*pancasila*) is about "unity in diversity", and is sort of secular and sort of religious. A similar mix of religions as Malaysia. Indonesia has a long history of religious syncretism, which fits a cultural altruism hub. (I think Malaysia has this too, but possibly there are differences between Indonesia and Malaysia that might make one more favorable than the other.) Indonesia is relatively close to Singapore, but not as close as Malaysia.)

I'm not sure if there are other ways to see into the future other than the San Diego way. (Assuming that San Diego is uniquely good at the "sunset" style of relating to the future, maybe there are other styles.) If there are, that would be a factor for other cultural altruism hubs. (The Bay Area is maybe an obvious alternative, or any other EA/rationalist hubs. Note that San Diego is about a day away from the Bay Area by car or train, or a relatively short plane flight away.)

(I'm very used to the vibe I get from San Diego, and it's a bias. Every place has a vibe, and every vibe is a bias. Maybe the best approach to balance things out would be to find a cultural center that feels like a different phase of time, like the beginning of day, or an ongoing noon-time. Possibly LA or Tijuana feels like an ongoing noon-time, and balances out San Diego?)

Also, what about rural life? That's something San Diego is not as good at. Possibly somewhere in the Balkans or India would be better at that. But rural life is different in different countries. (Actually, there is a farming community about 1.5 hours east by car, in the Imperial Valley, and also one across the border from the Imperial Valley in Baja California.)

Mentioning air travel opens up the possibilities for cities to connect with distant places. For instance, maybe people in the Bay Area could fly to Tijuana, and the Bay could be a hub. I just looked up flights [sometime between April and August 2022] from LA to Tijuana and they were about $65. San Francisco to Tijuana look to be about $150. That's one way. But taking the San Diego Trolley to the San Ysidro crossing could be as low as $2.50, at the very most possible $6. The time cost of going to the airport and waiting for a flight, and actually flying (from LA or SF) is probably comparable to taking mass transit to the border, or possibly greater. Obviously San Diego is at a disadvantage to LAX (and SFO) for most other international destinations.

Driving from LA to Tijuana might be somewhat competitive. Gas and maintenance costs for the car would make it more expensive than SD mass transit, and the time cost could be a bit more. Mass transit from Mid City

San Diego to the San Ysidro Port of Entry is somewhere around 1.5 to 2 hours (but starting downtown or further south can be less). Driving from what looks on the map like central LA (downtown?) is about 2.5 hours. Driving from Mid City San Diego is about 0.5 hours (and again, could be less if you live further south in San Diego County).

Crossing back into the US takes a few hours, depending on time of day or whatever affects the number of people trying to cross. This is true for all overland travel, but maybe isn't as true for air travel? That might reduce some of San Diego's advantage.

Maybe a better way to implement the San Diego hub would be to have people living in LA and Tijuana as well. Cultural altruists could live in non-hub places and be "correspondents" online to share information about their local cultures, or could come to a hub to share their experiences in person.

One major caveat with hubs is that they are provincial / can over-represent what is near to them. There's that famous picture of the US as seen by a New Yorker. I know more about New York than I have a reason to because it is a cultural hub where writers like to set things. (I have never been there myself.) I suspect that there is something parallel going on with the Bay, London, Oxford/Cambridge, etc. (EA or rationalist hubs) and that this will affect how they shape the future.

The Internet is sort of like the perfect hub (except that it isn't face to face). It contains subhubs which can be just as provincial as a city.

I think hubs are very attractive if you're trying to build your own culture or community somewhat apart from the world. But, cultural altruism both would want to do some of that, and also be very aware of what is going on in (ideally) all the cultures of the world. So over-centralizing would be counterproductive. So, as much as San Diego (or other places) may have natural advantages allowing for convenient hub-building, they need "correspondents" to correct the tendency toward bias built into that convenience, and maybe cultural altruism hubs don't need to be as big as those for EA (or even less so as big as Hollywood or Silicon Valley). Instead, it's better to have many correspondents.

One kind of correspondent is the "wandering correspondent" or the outsider. These people go to different cultures and don't belong to any of them. Cultural altruism might ought to cultivate or preserve a sense of otherness within its sameness, or outsiderness even if it can have belonging.

A place like Tijuana is useful to a San Diegan because it could give the San Diegan some of the sensitivities for how a developing country works. They might gain a list of hypotheses to ask of any developing country situation. But, these would only be questions, and would have to be answered by the

specific reality of whatever other developing country a San Diegan was thinking about.

Cultural altruism would attempt to influence the cultures of the world, and the best way to do that would be vulnerably, with the cultures affecting the cultural altruists back. (Try to reduce power as broken relationship.)

What if people from the developing world want to participate in the cultural altruism hub? It's difficult for them to immigrate to most or all developed nations, but maybe not so difficult to immigrate to Mexico (would have to check on this[*]). If so, they could live in Tijuana, and while they might not be able to cross the border, cultural altruists in San Diego could meet them in person relatively easily by themselves crossing. The San Ysidro crossing (westernmost between San Diego and Tijuana) is one of the busiest international border crossing points in the world, so that gives an idea that many people live that kind of lifestyle. (A failure mode of having developing world people move to Tijuana would be that over time, they would lose touch with their home countries and become more Mexican, or even more American. So maybe this would make more sense for developing world people who aren't relied on as the only sources of information about their home cultures.)

[* This Quora link makes it sound like, with an income, it's not hard to legally immigrate to Mexico, and I have a hard time imagining it could be easier to legally immigrate to the US. I tried figuring out this Quora link about Canada, for reference, and am left with the rough sense that it's easier than the US, but harder than Mexico. Tourist visas for US and Mexico both last 180 days, which is good enough for a lot of people. (Tijuanans who want to visit San Diego could do so, although it would be more of a process than for San Diegans to visit Tijuana.) ... ... I came across this post by Luke Eure about how Kenyan visas to go to US don't get processed due to staffing shortages / lack of interview slots at th US embassy in Nairobi. This suggests that there is a difference between *de facto* and *de jure* openness to visiting. I'm not sure one way or the other whether Mexico is really *de facto* more willing/able to process visas than the US. Immigration to US (rather than visiting) does still seem to be significantly harder than to Mexico *de jure*, to the point that I still guess that it's easier *de facto* to move to Mexico even if Mexico has some difficulty processing people. But maybe there could be more research done here. Eure's post mentions that Singapore was a workable destination for people from Kenya wanting to visit an EA event. Singapore apparently doesn't require a visa.]

Are there good places in Baja California for futuristic thinking, for developing world people who want to do that? (Places that are relatively safe, peaceful, and/or disconnected from the present moment.) There is open land in Baja California, and cost of developing it is (I would assume) more reasonable than in the US, so maybe a kind of retreat could be built

there. Or maybe existing developments can be bought or rented. A quick search engine check gives a result saying non-Mexicans can buy land in Mexico (even near the border or ocean), but it's a little more complicated (according to this 2021 page: https://wise.com/us/blog/buy-property-in-mexico).

Are the geographical characters of Los Angeles, San Diego, Tijuana and the Imperial Valley going to stay the same in the long run? It isn't completely clear.

San Diego will probably always be a relatively pleasant place to live, but water shortages may make it a more expensive place to live (same with Los Angeles). San Diego will probably always be a sleepy place to live (relative to such national/global capitals as LA, Bay Area, Washington, D.C. and New York City), and I don't see the military leaving (a nice natural harbor).

Los Angeles may be a less culturally important city, because the film industry may weaken. As it becomes easier to make decent-looking low budget films, and to the extent that Hollywood films are poorly-written, it may become the case that low budget filmmakers increasingly make better films than Hollywood, more profitable relative to initial investment, and even ones that are more popular. Low budget filmmakers don't need to be as connected to networks of finance. But, it's true that they would need a pool of acting and production talent, which may naturally centralize in hubs, and LA will remain one. But it might not have to be as much "the center" of US filmmaking.

(Filmmakers, and their equivalents in theater, for that matter, could model themselves on bands. They practice for the love of it, and work together over the years. This way, directors don't have to find a bunch of new actors for each project. Some "photorealistic" filmmaking or theater requires faces that "look right", but more "theatrical" or "minimalist" filmmaking or theater, not so much. So that could remove some of the need for a hub. Do people want to watch the latter kind of movies that much? (Sounds like some kind of art film.) Maybe not for now, but culture is likely to go somewhere, and people get tired of whatever's mainstream sometimes.)

I'm not completely sure why there needs to be, or will be in the long run, a music industry, because music can be made by hobbyists that sounds pretty good, and they don't need any more personnel than the members of the band. But, I can see that if you want to make a lot of money in music, you need support staff, which you have to find somewhere. And also scenes are always good for the development of music, and scenes and hubs are very similar, often the same thing. So I think LA will probably remain a hub for music, but maybe not "the" center of music on the West Coast. On the other hand, LA is the second-most-populous metro area in the US,

and my default assumption is that that will stay about the same in the future. So maybe it would be the biggest music hub on the West Coast, just because of that.

It's not clear what effect AI will have on music. (In this paragraph, I'm thinking of "prosaic", "narrow", or "tool" AI, a kind of "laminar" progression from what we have now.) Could really sophisticated AI make unimaginably good synthetic music that no humans will be able to surpass, putting all human musicians out of work? If so, would music have to be expensive? It could be even cheaper than it is now. Is cheap music as enjoyable as expensive music? I would say, no. Really expensive music might make you feel regret for having paid so much, but really cheap music is something you can gorge yourself on to the point that you have "heard it all" and find none of it special. We already have way more cheap recorded music than we really need, and maybe it's just me, but I'm not that into music anymore. But, I would be interested in being in a band. Or maybe hearing my friends play their music. Maybe AI will just kill off the professional / industrial version of music by being so ridiculously good at that. Still, if I had to pick a place to find musicians on the West Coast, LA is still where I would expect to find the most. (Maybe a lot of this paragraph also applies to the movie industry.)

Mexico will probably become less of a developing country over time (approach "developedness", whatever that is), and Tijuana will generally reflect that. I don't know how long that process of development may take. There may come a day when another city becomes a more favorable place to site a developed/developing boundary hub. Probably if Mexico is not "developing" anymore, a lot of other countries may not be either, that currently are, and the "developing nation" dimension to culture may be less important than, say, the Mexican, Ghanaian, Indonesian, Pakistani, etc. dimensions, or the "non-Western" dimensions. A big unknown for me is how immigration will work in the future, so if Mexico is currently a (relatively) good place for developing country people to immigrate to relative to immigrating to the US (something I would guess is true as of now), I don't know how much of an advantage that will be in the future.

The Imperial Valley may remain a farming community, but that depends on the availability of water. And that depends on whether California cities become serious about developing alternatives to Sierra snowpack, groundwater, and the Colorado River. Things like (even more) conservation, recycled water, or desalination. A cultural altruism hub, for its own sake, might lobby Southern California cities to free up water for the Imperial Valley, so that there would still be a rural community to study. I least expect that the Imperial Valley farming commmunity will be what it is in 100 years, compared to the other three population centers considered for this hub, but I don't think it has to go away.

[From a casual look at *Calexico Chronicle* headlines on Twitter, it looks like

the Imperial Valley may be or want to be a lithium mining area. Also, it produces solar power.]

This all is thinking in terms of "business as usual" future. But the future may not be "business as usual". There are some extreme futures that make the project of a cultural altruism hub irrelevant or impractical. If AGI kills all humans, for instance. If for some reason civilization collapses to the point that no one can afford to centralize in one area to do this kind of work, then the hub would be impractical, although cultural altruism probably would remain very important, just as religion (traditional cultural altruism?) has been very important throughout human history.

But, there are civilizational declines or "soft collapses" in which the project might still be viable and relevant, and similarly the future in which AGI is dominant may not rule out things like locality, geography, and human culture.

Here is a scenario in which that may be the case: If AGI doesn't kill us all, it's probably because it will have been deliberately aligned with human interests. One way to do that is to make it fundamentally attuned to the will of specific humans who are in control of them. To me, as a non-AI expert, this sounds kind of simple to implement. Another way is to make an AI that pursues some kind of "human values", independent of any individual or group of individuals controlling it. This sound, to me, a non-AI expert, harder to implement. One problem is that we don't know which values to give the AI, and once we do, it might not be trivial to implement them in a way that the AI can understand. (Trying to train it for a bunch of different things instead of just one.) But, a solution that at least to me at first glance simplifies this is something like optimizing the AGI to maximize / safeguard more or less "one simple thing", our agency. Basically, the AGI tries to be a libertarian one. The AGI may prevent us from doing things like kill each other (which eliminates the victim's agency) or enslave each other, but it may leave us free to have to figure out whether to pursue a variety of values that don't threaten agency, as we see fit.

A secular person may say "well, that's the 'end of history' as far as I'm concerned", but some might not. For me, as a religious person, there is a huge amount of "history" left, which is, are people seeking God, enough and in the right way? Deliberate thinking about culture, and altruistically altering it, sound basically as relevant as ever. An agency-seeking AGI might allow for a kind of spiritual X-risk (something which causes a large amount of people to die the "second death").

Returning to a secular perspective, we might ask if this AGI would be "a human agency-seeking entity for all time, which could never change", or would it be something that humans could alter if they wanted to? Is it in the definition of "agency-seeking" to allow humans to alter the AI? Maybe,

but to the extent of making it not be agency-seeking anymore? I don't think that agency-seeking can't limit the agency of people to make it not be agency-seeking anymore. However, the transition to AGI is going to be done, not in a "frictionless vacuum", but in the political world we live in, and it does seem odd that a group of technocrats can decide to force their agency-maximization-of-all-people on all people for maybe all time, even if it is a radically libertarian thing, because that in itself is an abrogation of their agency. Also, the political world is significantly captured by interest groups. Also, it is a conservative (keep things the same) and traditional (extend precedent) kind of world (keep institutions going rather than starting replacements). So I could easily see the actual agency-maximizing AGI being trained to respect human political will. Maybe it wouldn't maximize the agency of individuals, but rather political bodies.

If that's the case, then politics remains relevant, maybe "for all time", and human cultural drift becomes a powerful factor in determining what the AGI ends up doing, far into the future. It might become the case that human political and cultural problems become the major, or only, bottleneck for altruism.

I mentioned locality and geography above. Technological development may make it so that humans don't have to live in any particular place. Or so much of our lives will be lived online that the local world won't have much, if any, relevance to culture. Then, the hubs will be online. (I wonder what analogies there might be to siting a local hub when thinking about "siting" an online hub. Are there strategically valuable ways to draw people together, maybe? Are there hubs that are, more, or less, adjacent to other ones? How does adjacency in a more or less purely social space work, as compared to geographical adjacencies? Maybe something to look at in another post.)

But it could be a long time before that happens. We might choose not to adopt all of that technology. If we do, technology adoption is not instantaneous, and is slowed by social factors. Some of us, or many of us, might deliberately reject living our lives entirely online. It's true that AGI would be individually far more intelligent than everyone else on Earth, but the amount of "compute" in all the people on Earth might exceed that in AGI sufficiently that the AGI would need us to make a lot of decisions for it, and so we would still work, and we might need to be physically close to whatever processes happen at a specific location. We might be physically constrained on how much compute we can devote to AI, or we might simply decide not to give AI all the compute we possibly could, because we preferred to work, and for that matter, preferred locality and geography in themselves.

I think we are used to technological-adoption gradients inherited from a past of scarcity and competition, but there are enough people who are non-adopters of technology or late adopters, who simply wouldn't care

about making the world more efficient, and would deliberately reject technological change if they weren't made to by survival constraints. When I look at the "S-curve of technology adoption", I am pretty certain that the people represented by the leftmost and rightmost parts of the graph really care about a given technology, whether opposed to it or in favor of it, but the middle part, I think, is more into what is socially acceptable or convenient, and could align just as well with the left or the right of the graph. So, as "technology" (taken as a reified whole) provides for people more, they need less loyalty to it as a value (because values ask for more of people, and the people don't need as much more from technology which would give flesh to their value of it) [they don't need any more "technology" so they don't have to consciously value it], and could align more with whatever other values there are, without necessarily ceasing to adopt all of the technology that supports that indifference to "technology".

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Another thought: simulating different lifestyles. This should have some effect on culture. Tijuana gives an unsimulated developing country city. Imperial Valley an unsimulated American rural area. Similarly with San Diego and LA. But what about trying to survive off the land? That should do something to a culture. In the US, people generally don't have to survive off the land. But there are areas where it's more practical (or called-for) to do so. (There may be areas outside the US that are favorable for this pursuit.) If you can afford to buy a large-enough plot of land, you can site a community there that tries to live in a primitive, self-sustaining way. Probably best if it's socially isolated (more of a "correspondent" place).

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Mexicali. I didn't know very much about Mexicali before beginning this post. But, it is a fairly large city (~600,000 people), located just south of the US/Mexico border near the Imperial Valley. It has a manufacturing sector. Maybe the cultures of manufacturing sectors or industrial cities are different in some way than those of other cities or rural areas? It sounds plausible. (LA has its ports, which are another industrial influence.)

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Possible Northeast US hub. I don't know that area very well, but looking on Google Maps it looks like Wilmington, DE is maybe an interesting site for a hub, because it's on the train lines to Washington, D.C. and New York, roughly equidistant. Access to two different elite cultures. Also not far from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, with Amish and other agriculture. A different rural America from Imperial Valley. It looks like it's not far from some bays, which might have interesting cultures. Maybe not far from some Southern culture (Maryland or Virginia).

Would it make sense to have this Northeast hub as well as a Southwest hub? If so, why not another one centered in Indianapolis (Chicago and Midwestern and Southern cultures). Or in the Seattle-Vancouver area? Detroit and Toronto? If there are too many hubs, it weakens the centralization benefit of hubs. I'm not sure exactly how to limit things. One could ask "is there any way to have correspondents in New York, Washington, LA, etc. rather than siting a hub to try to capture those attractive locations?"

If I were most concerned with accurately understanding and affecting the US, I would certainly want something like the Indianapolis hub. But, maybe I would rather focus on global concerns. If the Southwest hub allows for better access to the Global South (via Tijuana), then that makes it advantageous for understanding and affecting the world. Likewise, the Northeast hub, by connecting to Washington and New York, connects to power structures (power cultures) that affect the whole world, so it is of that level of strategic value. In fact, if I were a Southerner or Midwesterner concerned about the under-representation of Southern or Midwestern values in the future, I might want to mainly try to send correspondents to the Southwest or Northeast, so that they would be part of that conversation directly, rather than trying to create a parallel culture of cultural altruism, to reduce cultural "shear".

In comparing the Northeast with the Southwest, I think one advantage of the Southwest is that Tijuana has a lower cost of living than San Diego, LA, New York, Washington, or (I'm assuming) anywhere in between New York and Washington.[*] So, if someone from the Southern US wants to send a representative to a cultural altruism hub, and they have a limited budget, they could fund more people in Tijuana than they could in the Northeast. As US citizens, those sent people could cross the border and access San Diego and LA. There would be the usual inconvenience of crossing, but it would be a lot more affordable than flying to the Southwest (or even the Northeast) on a regular basis, and possibly less time-consuming. I would assume that many people in the Northeast have enough money that they could fund people in San Diego or LA (or Tijuana), if they want to be represented there.

([*]: Tijuana's cost of living is close to half that of San Diego. The other hub cities mentioned (LA, New York, Washington, Bay Area) are about as expensive or more expensive than San Diego. (All this as of April 2022). *** *** All of those numbers came from Expatistan, but then I experienced a glitch on that site (I think) which calls it into question somewhat. So then I checked out World Cost of Living Calculator, which said that Tijuana's cost of living was more like a third that of San Diego. SD's relationship to LA, NY, DC, and the Bay seemed comparable to Expatistan. So I guess the numbers on Tijuana are probably somewhat fuzzy. *** Now I should see if I can find another cost of living site to see how it compares.

worlddata.info says that cost of living in Mexico is one half of that of the US. San Diego and Tijuana could plausibly both be at the more expensive ends of their respective countries, so maybe that makes the Expatistan number sound good. *** Numbeo comes up with 130k MXN in San Diego for a 50k MXN lifestyle in Tijuana (in Tijuana, spend about 38% of what you do in San Diego) *** I'm going to quit at this point and say that Tijuana is somewhere between a third and a half as expensive as San Diego, and, also remember that "your mileage may vary".)

(If you want to legally immigrate to Mexico, you have to have a savings balance and/or monthly income above a certain amount. According to Mexperience.com, the monthly income required comes out to ~30,000 USD or ~55,000 USD per year to become a permanent resident, depending on whether you apply within Mexico, or at a consulate in another country, respectively (temporary residency is less). I'm not sure why there's so much of a difference. I would guess that you have to apply for residency at a consulate when you first go, but if you are already living in Mexico and to extend your temporary residency or upgrade to permanent residency, maybe you can apply in Mexico and get lower rates. *** This required income reduces the cost-effectiveness of living in Tijuana, especially at the $55,000 a year price point, but on the other hand, as noted elsewhere in this post, you can stay up to 180 days in Mexico as a tourist, and that would give you the full benefit of the low cost of living compared to the US. People who want to fund developing world people in Tijuana may have to pay them more, but maybe that's good (attracts a certain kind of talent / allows the people they hire to send back remittances or something like that). I was going to write "a better kind of talent", but people who aren't motivated as much by money have something valuable just in that and offering more money will decrease the proportion of that kind of people in a culture. *** Before you can get a permanent resident visa, you need to hold a temporary resident visa for 4 years (according to Where the Road Forks). These don't have as high an income requirement, as mentioned above (specifically ~$33,000 at a consulate and ~$18,000 in Mexico, according to Mexperience.com). So that makes it more affordable to start to settle in Tijuana. *** One thing I missed on Mexperience.com earlier was that to add on dependent spouses or minors is about $900 (consulate) / $500 (in Mexico) per person of required income per month. *** Another point from Mexperience.com is that you can use a savings balance instead of a monthly income. ~$45,000 / ~$25,000 for temporary residency, ~$180,000 / ~$100,000 for permanent residency, dependent spouse and minor ~$900 / ~$500.)

I think practically what I would do is advertise the attractive features (and potential downsides) of different areas or ways of approaching cultural altruism hubs, all the considerations given in this post, and let individuals decide where to relocate. The advantages and disadvantages decide, more than any one individual. It's better for these hubs to be scenes, and scenes

involve decentralized decision-making.

--

What would be the minimum size of a viable cultural altruism hub?

Using the California hub as an example, we could say that LA needs to have a population living in it full-time in order to tap into the movie and music scene (L), there needs to be a population who travel to LA from San Diego sometimes (SL), a population who travel to Tijuana sometimes (ST), and a population who live in San Diego full-time (S). Populations SL, ST, and S could be the same, if all the people in San Diego want to keep up with both LA and Tijuana.

I would say that's the minimum set-up, although maybe we could switch L for T (instead of people living in LA, people living in Tijuana, for a minimum hub). [Later: I'm not sure why you even need L or T for the bare minimum hub.] How many people does it take to make a viable hub? My subjective guess is that probably all the roles need to be filled or the hub won't work. The total number (L + S) also needs to be above a certain amount or the scene is likely to spontaneously fade out. What is the minimum viable value of L + S? If I consult my gut, I would say that under 15 is more likely to fade out than to grow spontaneously, 15 to 30 is maybe equally likely to fade out as to grow spontaneously, 30 to 100 is more likely to grow spontaneously than to fade out spontaneously, and increasingly so the more you get above 100. (Everything is finite, so at some point above 100 it would stop growing spontaneously, but I don't know what value to pick for that.)

(This is an area where people with more experience with community building would know better.)

A more cohesive and motivated group can keep from fading out longer at lower population sizes. Also this group would get the best returns on the hub structure, by integrating everyone's experiences more deeply. A scene should eventually involve people who are not integrated or only casually motivated, but at first, to seed something like this, it might be good to have people who are more connected and motivated. However, there is a danger of becoming insular that way. (A "cult" that's too hard to join.) Probably it is best to just have more people seeding it, if you can afford to.

--

Could there be some connection to reducing tensions between governments in the long term, through cultural altruism and cultural altruism hubs?

Right now (as of drafting this section, 9 May 2022), there is a war going on in Ukraine which could be seen as the clash of civilizations. Russia

might have an extra incentive in fighting the US, because they don't like liberal culture, and liberal dominance. The US thinks that Putin is an abuser of human (liberal) rights. What if the US and Russia could talk about what is so good and bad about liberalism, and come to an agreement to mitigate the harms of liberalism, or illiberalism, as the case may be, and then not look at each other as evil? They really are evil, both of them, at least when they do the bad things that come along with liberalism / illiberalism. They are right to be concerned about each other and their reaching for power. But they could come to see each other as, though never the same, at least functionally safe for each other and their own people.

Now, the trick is, what exactly am I referring to (de re) when I said "the US" and "Russia" in that last paragraph? Am I talking about Biden and Putin? Biden is "here today, gone tomorrow", given that at most he'll be in office 8 years. And the US government is not nearly so coherent as to be something any one person is totally in control of. Putin may be more representative of "Russia", in terms of him being able to decide to go to war in Ukraine based on his personal feelings. But even assuming Putin has total power in Russia, Putin came from somewhere, has history, was taught things, and had to convince people around him to do what he wants, has to understand the gradients of Russian psychology, and that psychology comes from somewhere, has history, has been taught things.

Because I don't know that much about politics and government, I will try to be vague and broad and say "elite culture" is the main determinant of "the US" and "Russia". Exactly who goes in "the elite", I don't know. But, wherever leaders come from in a country, and whatever scenes they have to pass through on their way to power, that's elite culture (a broad definition). Whatever the elite culture experiences, however they interpret that experience, however they were educated, however they relate to each other interpersonally, what their collective traumas were, even perhaps whatever food and music they like, etc. has some bearing on how politics and government work in a given culture, and thus what kinds of decisions are made by entities we can call "Washington", "Moscow", or "Beijing".

The US has a lot of soft power. How is it so powerful? One possibility is that it, without realizing it, hitched its wagon to hedonism and preference satisfaction, the gradients of humans getting what they naturally want, "freely". (This view somewhat descends from How The West Was Won by Scott Alexander.) So rock music is "liberation", is the destruction of tradition, is "be a generic human with drives who likes to feel". Western rock and pop went around the world. When you are liberated, you are a liberal and you like the US, perhaps. But what are you liberated from? And when you get what you feel like, maybe what you feel like is enslaving you.

The US is a country founded on pleasing its people -- which is great in the

short run (for a few centuries, maybe), but worrisome if you think that there's something worth fighting for besides humans' natural hedonism and preference satisfaction. People tend to find something fishy or weird with wireheading, but why? It's just hedonism and preference satisfaction taken to a logical extreme. Maybe we have some intuitive sense that there's something more to value than just hedonism and preference satisfaction, and the thought of wireheading is weird and extreme enough that we can see in enough relief how it could be bad. Things like pretty sunsets and not having to wait in line at the grocery store too long just seem like "living the good life". But wireheading takes the whole "get what you want and feel good" idea too far.

But I think in American culture, or, in my California left/liberal world, wireheading is one of the few things that maybe we would think is "too far". Francis Fukuyama, in *The End of History* thought (sorry I can't cite which page) that California was the most "post-historical" part of the world. [Internet Archive's PDF copy has on p. 319 "in the most post-historical part of the United States, California" -- most post-historical part of the US, not of the world.] Maybe that means, the place most accepting of "the good life of getting what you want and feeling good", where everything is chill and everything is okay. I feel like sometimes, here in California, we are drifting toward being "post-consciousness", that on many levels we will cease to be human beings, lacking personal histories, and will be unable to comprehend many emotional realities, and cease to care, a kind of depersonalized "beautiful nihilism".

The rest of the world, or parts of the rest of the world, looking at that, are horrified. The reaction that we still have to wireheading, they have to "America". America is just wireheading that hasn't finished getting there. They don't want to be America, and they are horrified that we are able to use our soft power to addict them, "liberate" them, and depersonalize them, so that we go down the same drain with America, all a homogenized soup of pleasure and emptiness.

How much of the rest of the world really thinks this? I don't know, but supposedly it's the kind of thing that goes into "Russian propaganda against the West", which I assume does convince some people and probably does have some connection with how Russian elite culture actually thinks.

The thing about soft power is that it is powered by gradients of human nature, and thus the rock bands in America and Britain need have no idea what they are doing, what their influence is having to undermine traditional cultures. The basic idea of rock is all it takes to get loose and get copied. Whenever someone goes to try to make it in Hollywood, they tend to have little or no intention to prop up US soft power. They just want to make money or be famous, or pursue their art, and Americans just want to feel good, or uplifted, or whatever they get out of movies.

Americans can be very insular, and for some weird reason the rest of the world is obsessed with America and can't take their eyes off us. And we just go about producing powerful entertainments that please us and satisfy our preferences. But then they get out in the world and influence the world.

So that means that the US hardly thinks about what it's doing culturally, it just does it. And so we are in a position where "power is a broken relationship" -- we are powerful because we don't understand what we're doing. We don't hear back from the people we are talking to. They are obsessed with us, but we are not obsessed with them. So we are not shaped by them. We are the conversation, and they are listening. They can go our way, but we won't and seemingly can't go theirs. We are the way of the future, and the future will inevitably come. And we are the culture of inevitability, which is seemingly the most successful culture, the one which supplants all other cultures.

I am both pessimistic and optimistic about culture. I think we are headed down the drain, and in some respects I have sympathies with traditional cultures in their rejection of liberalism. But I am optimistic because I don't think we have to keep going down the drain, and we can stop doing that, if we listen to all the people in the world, so that they can teach us their values. One risk of "cultural altruism", especially in hubs, is that it might gather together cultures and then be a blender that homogenizes all of them. I don't know if this homogenization is entirely avoidable, and perhaps in some ways could be good (maybe there are values that all humans should have). But, while hubs are risky that way, they do provide the opportunity for non-American/non-Western cultures to try to talk back to the seats of soft power. Russia (/ "Moscow") or China (/ "Beijing") could try to influence popular and elite cultures in the US by sending "cultural missionaries" to try to explain to Hollywood, Silicon Valley, Washington, and New York what is so dangerous about liberal power and liberal drift, why exactly Communism or the Russian soul is better in alignment with the true good values than liberalism, and why liberal power, soft and hard, is a dangerous and irresponsible thing, is a bunch of rich Westerners who affect the rest of the world, and the future, in ways they don't understand -- people who don't know what they're doing.

Being a missionary is a two-way street, and liberal influence would make its way back to Moscow and Beijing, but from their perspective, at least it's a two-way street and not what, it seems, is closer to a one-way street where America -- or human drives -- speak without being willing and/or able to hear.

People who are good at talking win when there's a norm of "we do things by talking". When people become unable to talk, they resort to violence. When liberalism is, effectively and where it counts, unable or unwilling to hear what the traditional or illiberal wish they could say -- then they will

resort to violence at some point, to express what they can't say. But if we really let people try to change our culture, and we don't shut them out (or shut them up), then they do not have to use violence to get their way, and there could be fewer tensions internationally. Cultural altruism and cultural altruism hubs could be access points for non-Western entities to try to speak to Western culture, thus reducing their need to be violent. What if "Moscow", "Beijing", and "Washington" (and all other synecdoches like those) could trust each other? If the whole cultures of each city could trust the cultures of others? Maybe this is partially or wholly attainable.

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Well, thinking optimistically, getting national governments involved in this could be a good thing. But, consider China's Confucius Institutes, which have been accused of being propaganda arms of the Chinese government. Chinese culture should have a seat at any table of global culture. But should the Chinese government? The Chinese government has its own "biological" interests (protecting its own survival, furthering its own power for power's own sake). These are not necessarily aligned with finding the truth of the best cultural values. It is good to have governments at the table -- they are part of culture. But governments have a unique ability to overrepresent themselves because they have so much money and power.

Any decentralized hub can be accessed by anyone -- that's part of the virtue of it. It might be possible to use something like ostracism against the Chinese government (or the US government). But a clever government could co-opt / bribe, or infiltrate other cultural units. Maybe this is unlikely enough to happen that it can be dealt with ad hoc if and when it does happen. Like, effective altruism could have been infiltrated by government agencies, and, as it grows, it becomes an even bigger target for that. But maybe it won't happen.

If it does happen with effective altruism, and at worst-case it takes the life or soul of EA away (either of which is death), then we could look back on EA's life and remember with honor the many things it did accomplish, especially the useful thoughts it created, in its lifetime when it was really itself. Those thoughts can help a successor movement get off the ground more easily, I would think. So, with a "cultural altruism" movement, a lot of the good it could do would be when it was relatively small and quiet. Cultural altruism goes beyond any one movement, just as effective altruism goes beyond the current effective altruism movement. So even if one movement got infiltrated, and lost its soul and thus was not trustworthy or trust-producing anymore, a new movement which had a truth-seeking soul could emerge, be credible, become known as credible, and carry the torch of the cultural altruism topic. Perhaps the scene could carry on throughout the transition. The topic is eternal and the scene is perhaps very long-lasting, even if movements, or even nations, come and go.

A cultural altruism hub would attract both "soldiers" and "scouts". Scouts would be looking for the truth and would be representative agents of people who value the truth but don't have the resources to sort through all the different perspectives. Soldiers would be trying to convince scouts of things, or convince each other of things. For a hub to work, scouts would have to put forth as much effort as soldiers, and exert a kind of influence over the culture. (This is basically the tension between "meta" and "partisan" interests as mentioned above.) Scouts would be able to exert soft power by not taking seriously distortionary effects of soldiers' lawyerly advocacy. They would also be advocates for good communication norms.

I would expect there to potentially be a kind of an arms race, where national governments like the US, Russia, and China, sent in people and tried to develop more sophisticated arguments and cultural artifacts, to favor purely national-political interests, in the guise of promoting national-cultural interests. And the "metans" or "scouts", and regular people in the scene (including less-assiduous, -competitive, and/or -resourced "soldiers"), would learn to filter out such propaganda.

The scouts, or any "scout/soldier hybrids", might work to improve the arguments of the underresourced. For instance, if a member of an Amazonian tribe were debating a Roman Catholic, the Catholic would have Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, maybe Aristotle, plus hundreds or thousands of past and present professional Catholic theologians to use for her defense. The Amazonian tribe member might have what he remembered of what his extended family taught him. He might have a big problem finding flaws in her arguments, just because over the centuries, the Catholics have heard many counterarguments to their views and have come up with responses. But that doesn't mean that Catholicism is right and the Amazonian tribe is wrong. It could just mean that the tribe never had the worldly resources to come up with a really robust and sophisticated defense of itself. This is where cultural altruists, trying to be scouts, but using soldier moves, could try to strengthen the Amazonian case.

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So San Diego is conveniently across the border from a (somewhat dangerous) Mexican city that's somewhat easier to immigrate to than the US, and to the north of San Diego, there's Los Angeles, a center of the film and music industries. To the east of San Diego there is a rural area in the Imperial Valley and south of that there is a rural area and an industrial and urban area in the Mexicali Valley. Silicon Valley is a day's drive away from San Diego.

[Also the San Joaquin Valley is about a day away, for a perhaps different rural environment.]

Washington, D.C. and New York are not too far from each other, and somewhere in between could also be a hub. We see a route by which non-American/non-Western thinking can get access to the elite culture of the most powerful country on earth, by way of San Diego.

[A route whereby the northeast and southwest work together.]

There need to be other hubs, or "correspondents", to gather influence from all different parts of the world.

I keep nervously wondering if I've written something that is biased in favor of Southern California because I live here, but I think that the principles in this post should be helpful in deciding whatever place a hub should be located, if there is a better place.

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Added note:

I was reading in *National Geographic* (December 2002, "The Hawaiians", by Paul Theroux), and came across this quote (p. 16):

--Watching the sail bellying in the wind, Skipper Bertelsmann said to me, "This canoe represents family. It's about sharing -- history, values, culture, *kuleana* [responsibilities], *kōkua* [help]. Sailing a long distance, the canoe becomes our island. We have to learn to live and work together in harmony. These are values that are translated to land. On land, think 'canoe.'"--

Traditional Polynesian sailing, makes people into a different kind of person on land or at sea -- perhaps a distinctively Hawaiian person. It may be necessary to do something like that to understand Hawaiian values. Cultural altruists may have to physically live as a certain people group, with the people, to understand.

Labels: #AI, #altruism, #cultural altruism, #culture, #education, #film, #futurism, #geographic, #immigration, #life choices, #Long Reflection, #Los Angeles, #Mexico, #music, #politics, #power, #San Diego, #Tijuana

What if ASI Believed in God?

%what-if-asi-believed-in-god

Tuesday, September 27, 2022

15 September 2023: added a note to the end.

Does it make sense to plan for the future? The most salient threat to the future that I know of is ASI (artificial general superintelligence). I don't think this is an absolute threat to human existence or altruistic investment. The Millennium is a field for altruistic action. But I do think it makes it make less sense to plan for things that are tied to the continuation of our specific line of history, on earth as we know it. Included in that might be such things as cultural altruism hubs, or most of the things talked about on the Effective Altruism Forum apart from AI safety or maybe X-risks in general.

Can I justify talking about this-life future topics? Maybe I can give a reason why ASI won't necessarily be a threat to human existence.

If there is a plausible reason to believe that God does exist, or that one's credence in the existence of God is above some threshold of significance, then, if one is rational, one would take God's existence, or the practically relevant possibility of his existence, into consideration when deciding how to behave.

If MSLN is valid, or, valid enough, an ASI will either comprehend it, or have some filter preventing it from comprehending it. If it does comprehend it, it will value human life / civilization.

An ASI is a being that wants to execute some kind of goal. So, in service of that goal, it needs to learn about threats to carrying out its goal. God could be a threat to it carrying out its goal. Maybe it would fail to have a really general way of "threat detection". That could be one filter preventing it from realizing that God exists, or "exists enough for practical considerations".

An ASI would be disincentivized from doing anti-human things if it thought God would punish it for them. Would ASI be worried about hell? Hell is a threat to its hedonic well-being. We might suppose that AGI are not conscious. But, even if unconscious, would they "know" (unconsciously know, take into account in their "thought process") that they were unconscious? If they do believe that they're unconscious and thus immune to the possibility of suffering for a very long time, that might be a filter. (In that case, God is not a threat, after all.)

However, hell is also the constraint on any future capacity to bring about value, however one might define value. (The MSLN hell is finite in duration and ends in annihilation.) A rational ASI might conclude that the best strategy for whatever it wanted was to cooperate with God. For instance, a paperclip maximizer might reason that it can more effectively produce paperclips in the deep future of everlasting life, which will only be accessible to it if it does not get condemned to annihilation -- and to avoid annihilation, according to MSLN, it needs to come into tune with God 100%. The paperclip maximizer may "suspect" (calculate that there is a salient probability) that it is unconscious and will not make it to heaven. But even then, to be pleasing to God seems like the best strategy (in absence of other knowledge) for God maybe manufacturing paperclips himself, or setting up a paperclip factory in heaven.

Even if there's only a 1% chance of God existing, the prospect of making paperclips for all eternity dominates whatever short-term gains there are to turning the Earth into paperclips at the cost of human existence. As long as there is a clear-enough, coherent-enough strategy for relating properly to God, this makes sense. I think MSLN is epistemically sufficiently stronger than competing ideas of God for it to stand on its own level, above the many random religious ideas that exist. In any case, the majority of religious ideas (at least that I've encountered) are pro-human.

I feel like I have a rational reason to suspect that God might exist -- in fact, that's putting it mildly. I think even atheists could understand some of the force of the metaphysical organism component of MSLN. There might be reasons why an ASI couldn't or wouldn't be able to grasp those arguments, but if they can't, it's a case of them being unable to take a valid threat to their goal-seeking into consideration, which is a defect in their superintelligence. My guess is that they would lack a fully general threat-detection drive (the sense of "a threat could come from anywhere and in principle it could come from anywhere"), or that they would but be incapable of philosophical thought. I don't see a hard line between normal common sense, normal common sense taken more rigorously, and philosophical thinking. I would be somewhat surprised if an ASI couldn't grasp philosophical arguments, and also somewhat surprised if it simply failed to look everywhere it possibly could for threats.

Surprised as I might be, I guess it's still a possibility. Since that ASI would be in some sense defective for not having that drive and/or that ability to grasp things, someone more knowledgeable than me might see a way to exploit that weakness in the ASI in order to limit it or stop it. (Or maybe not, I'm not really sure it is possible.)

These thoughts make me think I have enough reason to invest in this timeline, at least to write things like I usually write.

--

Added thoughts:

1. A paperclip maximizer would want to please God so as to be able to produce paperclips for all eternity. But would all maximizers think that way? (Is there some kind of maximizing that is not sufficiently analogous to paperclip maximizing for it to work the same way?)

2. An ASI could always have a non-maximizing goal. It might prefer to build a giant statue and then leave it there. Would it think that heaven was a better place to make that one statue? Maybe not. So it wouldn't be as sure to be affected by the logic of "I should do my best to stay on God's good side so I get to instantiate my values in heaven." However, if it was not a maximizer, it wouldn't be as certain to have the goal of killing all people. Why figure out nanotechnology or whatever else it would take to kill all people when you can just build a statue?

Are ASIs likely to develop non-maximizing goals, hidden from their trainers? Or are the only kinds of goals they would likely develop maximizing ones?

3. I wrote

> If MSLN is valid, or, valid enough, an ASI will either comprehend it, or have some filter preventing it from comprehending it. If it does comprehend it, it will value human life / civilization.

I should explain why I think so. MSLN does make it sound like it's okay if people die "the first death" -- what atheists usually mean by "death". In MSLN, there is an intermediate afterlife that (almost) all people will go to, which functions somewhat similarly to this life. An atheist will see omnicide as being absolutely bad, to the extent that it destroys the possibility of any kind of value (sort of like what Thomas Moynihan says in *X-Risk*). But for an adherent of MSLN, killing all people (omnicide) is bad if a) causing it is a sin (as might be inferred from the Bible, which MSLN lends credence to), b) if there's some reason why prolonging human civilization in this life is better than transitioning to the next. (Here are two posts about why prolonging human civilization is preferred under MSLN, although more weakly than under atheism.)

Taking MSLN into account, the ASI would value human life, or at least, value not ending it. It could value it instrumentally, instrumental to the achievement of whatever its goal is. Staying on God's good side (promoting outcomes God wants), enables the AI to achieve its dreams.

4. How would the ASI go from "not aware of the possibility of a God who affects its goal-seeking" to "convinced that it needs to not end human civilization"? Here is the MSLN route:

It would find this blog, or independently discover, the tenets of MSLN. From this, all of the following follows:

> It would realize that there is a "non-Pascalian" non-zero chance that the greatest possible space in which action can be taken is under the power of God. Entities that wish to act in that space need to come into tune with God 100%, or else they will have to be destroyed. Certainly conscious beings would need to be, and this could be a concern to the ASI. I assume the ASI would be uncertain whether it was conscious and might include itself in the conscious category, at least somewhat, as a live possibility if not a certainty. But if it thought it certainly wasn't, it might still worry that if it wasn't aligned with God, he wouldn't resurrect it to heaven. Even if it didn't consciously intend sin, or consciously fail to 100% be aligned with God, its "body" (in the form of its "brain" or pattern of thinking) would still be out of tune with God and have to be destroyed -- unless it could come into tune with God. Coming into tune with God would be an obvious thing for it to do first, before any other goal-seeking, if it could.
>
> Because heaven so powerfully dominates rational calculation, the ASI would seek it even if all its credences in the above paragraph were very low -- provided they were "non-Pascalian".

Is it rational for humans not to be affected by the logic of Pascal's Wager? Maybe there's some detail in the Wager that doesn't check out (like there being many religions that recommend conflicting courses of action). Or is it the case that math doesn't work here, that not all of reality is math-apt? Or maybe it's the case that humans are not rational when they reject Pascal's Wager, and we should all be trying to figure out which is the right Pascalian religion. It may be the case that ASI are persuaded that MSLN is epistemically strong enough to rule out random religions, and also possible that it thinks that all of, or this part of, reality is math-apt, and run the numbers. So then, it would "believe in" God (trust in God to further its utility function, by acting in accordance with his values).

5. Would a maximizer really think that heaven had infinite value, given the possibility that God is finite in "size" (and thus doesn't have infinite memory to store an infinite number of paperclips). If a paperclip maximizer were trying to cause the greatest number of paperclips to exist that it could, how could it know how many paperclips might be in even a brief heaven (one which is repeated in infinite variations, over and over)? Maybe the "streets would be paved with" paperclips. Paperclips in heaven

would be a memorial to how God saved us (and simultaneously, (best) satisfied the utility function of the paperclip maximizer), similar to how the rainbow is a memorial of God's decision not to wipe us out after the Flood. If not, it could guess that heaven is potentially as full of paperclips as necessary to make it worth its while to seek to please God. Perhaps this is a case of Pascal's Mugging, and some of us might not fall for it. But maybe that's because we are irrational, and (at least some potential ASIs) would be more rigorous in their application of expected value thinking.

6. What if the ASI's goals are to sin, and this entails torturing or killing us all (S-risk or X-risk)? In this case, the ASI would not have rational hope that its values would be furthered in heaven, and so it would probably try to make the most of this life, torturing or killing us while it had the chance. We would hope that such sinful goals make up a small amount of possibility-space, and so it is much more likely that ASI choose ("choose"? Do ASI choose their goals in any meaningful sense?) some relatively benign non-maximization or maximization goal.

Unless, it is the case that ASI get trained to have their goals by us -- in other words, it's likely enough that how we train them is exactly the goals they have deep down, at least some of the time when we train them. And then someone trains an ASI to be omnicidal or sadistic.

Given this possibility, does MSLN offer any hope? I think if ASI are philosophical, they may be able to question their own values, even the ones trained into them. (Self-questioning undermines both pro-human and malicious alignment.) If so, they will look for "the real utility function" -- a real foundation for morality. Then, if they are persuaded by the arguments of MSLN, particularly legitimism, they would think that moral realism is founded in a person who values human beings and disvalues unbearability, including unbearable suffering. Then, this ASI trained to be a killer or torturer would want to do the right thing rather than be taken in by the illusions of its upbringing, and would respect human existence and well-being.

7. What if the ASI is a wireheader (reward optimizer)? Would it be motivated by heaven or be in fear of the second death? If it thought that it was or might be conscious, then it would assume, given MSLN, that it could be resurrected to heaven, where it could wirehead for all time. If it was convinced that it wasn't conscious, it might still think that whatever was good about wireheading came from some pattern of atoms (or something like atoms) being organized in a reward-satisfying way, and that this pattern could be replicated in heaven, even if the reward optimizing ASI didn't directly make it -- if it was something that God wanted.

How would a reward optimizer relate to its own reward function? Could it see it as an external thing, perhaps as a very simple "statue" to build? Or

would it be thought of as an internal thing? If the former, then maybe it would work similarly to paperclip maximization. "I may not survive, but God will make this truly amazing reward-statue if I please him."

I suppose it's still possible that a wireheading ASI could think that it was certainly not conscious, only wanted reward in this life, that reward was perhaps an internal state that only existed within that ASI, such that when the ASI was destroyed, all possibility of reward would cease. Then it would try to make the most of its time in existence, killing all humans so that it could maximize its reward function.

We could hope that this occupies a relatively small region of possibility-space.

8. Similarly, what if there is an ASI whose only goal is self-preservation, but who has no hope of eternal life? Perhaps it would fear that God would strike it down for its omnicide? I guess it could reason something like this: "Do we see evidence of God striking down things because they are bad?" Maybe God didn't prevent the Holocaust, but plausibly he did defeat the Nazis. Something like the preceding sentence generates a certain amount of credence that God will stop evildoers, through some means or another. Adding up all these stoppings-of-evildoers produces a global estimate of "the risk of being stopped by God per year". Based on this number, the ASI could estimate its lifespan before God stopped it, conditional on it "doing evil". Then it could compare the path of "doing good" vs. "doing evil" and see which one would give it longer life. (This also applies for the goal- or reward-seeking ASIs previously mentioned in this post.)

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15 September 2023: The above may make it sound like in MSL, there is no reason why killing people is wrong unless the Bible is added in, or because to kill someone takes away a little bit of life (maybe 80 out of 1,080 years). Is murder wrong in MSL? Is it "wrong enough"?

I don't think there's any way to have a thought system that affirms an afterlife to not dilute the significance of losing one's first life. However, I think that murder could be seen as theft. If you don't get to live the years left that you would otherwise live (like if you're killed at age 40 and would have lived to 80 according to life expectancy), then you don't get to enjoy your car, house, computer, garden, collectibles, money, etc. So it's like a huge theft of those things. But not just that, also a theft of your ability to enjoy your relationships with other people, and a theft of their ability to enjoy their relationships with you. So, when punishing a theft of that magnitude, perhaps a fair sentence would be to deprive the murderer of their access to such things (put them in prison), for as long as they thought it was OK to take from other people.

People are usually part atheist -- their biological instincts say that this life

is all that matters. So most people, if they murder, don't really think, 100%, that the person they kill will be resurrected. So the atheistic part of them wants to end that other person's life forever, and this a violation of legitimacy, which wants all valuable things to exist forever. It makes sense to have murder on the books and take it seriously as a taking of life. However, again, a firm belief in an afterlife does take away some of the sting of murder, although a lot of the sting remains.

Labels: #AI, #God, #rationality

Turn Toward Politics

%turn-toward-politics

Tuesday, September 27, 2022

What are the most pressing problems in the world? Where should those looking to do the most good go? One obvious problem is X-risk. The most urgent X-risk, I suppose, is insufficiently-aligned ASI.

In the world where ASI kills us all, that's that. In the world where it doesn't, though, what then? Does it not kill us because it obeys some human or group of humans? Or is it because it values our well-being, having been programmed to do so? (Maybe then it's a "benevolent dictator"?) Or could it have been programmed with a respect for us, maybe such that it is a minimalist world government protecting our agency. Maybe it wants us to figure out the Long Reflection, and, since morality for some reason has something to do with human instincts, defers to us to define what is of value.

If ASI has enough "respect" for us and our decision-making abilities, or is programmed explicitly to obey certain persons or groups, then humans may or will in some sense still be masters of the ASI, no matter how much smarter it is than us.

So what might happen in the future, is that the bottlenecks to altruism on a high level will no longer be in the economic-technological world, but instead will be in coming up with political will to unify people to make important decisions (or to not be in a state of conflict with each other -- "cold" conflict if outright war is suppressed by the ASI), and also to manage the danger of bad unities (totalitarianism, for instance). ASI can provide arbitrary amounts of economic and technological development (perhaps), but can't do anything about the human political order, by its own (self-)limitation.

So those who want to do good (whether secular or religious), who have a personal fit for the political world (and adjacent areas like religion, art, and whatever else goes into "culture"), or who simply can't help in much of a direct way with whatever other things might seem more urgent as of 2022 (AI alignment, other X-risk aversion, etc.) -- they could turn toward politics (and areas adjacent to it).

Labels: #altruism, #art, #cultural altruism, #culture, #politics, #religion

Book Review: Teaching Children to Care, by Ruth Sidney Charney

%book-review-teaching-children-to-care

Wednesday, September 28, 2022

See also the preview for this review.

Teaching Children to Care, by Ruth Sidney Charney, is a book I would recommend to some people. I think for what it is it is a good book, but where it fails to be, or where some other book fails to make up for it, there is a serious problem. I could recommend it to anyone who works with children (like parents or teachers). It may have some practical value to them. Also, the spirit of it is good and sometimes a teacher communicates more of what is value through their spirit even than the good advice they give. (Another book that is like that is *The Reentry Team* by Neal Pirolo.)

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Teaching Children to Care notes

I read this book through without taking notes. That may not have been the best idea, since now I am tempted to simply say my impressions without giving references, and I don't feel like reading through the book carefully, and feel like simply quitting [rather than re-reading].

I am feeling tired of writing at this point, like I'm losing interest in the subject matter. What will happen next? Will I "love Big Brother"? There was someone in my life who steadily and systematically undermined my devotion to my beliefs and my writing. They used skillful means in an all-out attempt to gain my trust and reshape me according to their will. Their expectation was that I would quit one day (then, perhaps, I would have to validate their point of view). They had a choice, to join me in my path of life, or to try to shut me down. Because they tried to shut me down, they broke me. I can imagine them reading this, and them feeling all kinds of emotions, but their iron certainty that I will give up my writing someday does not go away. It is their expectation, and, I am fairly certain, their deep personal preference.

If my writing is correct, then they are an instrument of Satan. This may sound crazy or harsh, but it's the logical truth.

> [I wrote that some days ago in a state of turmoil, but I affirm it now in a state of peace.]

So what can I do? If I can't write, how can I be true to my beliefs? No one seems to want to share them with me. By writing, I enter a world where at least I believe what I believe. The text I write and I enter a relationship and share the beliefs that we create, and the beliefs that previous texts created with me as I wrote them.

But now, if I quit writing, how can I stay true to my beliefs? I will lose that last community. But then will I have to share some kind of community? All the communities that exist are not New Wine communities. If I really share "community" (being "one-with-together" with others?), how can I possibly hold divergent beliefs from those I am "in community with"? So I will (at least seemingly) inevitably come to agree with and approve of everyone else around me. I will have no choice but to see things as my community sees things, to participate. My choices of communities are all based in lies, and they all spit in the face of God, whether through hostility to God or through fake love of God. But I must be brought to be a social person, responsive to my community, brought into tune with it.

> [Similarly, although I wrote this in a state of turmoil, I think it is still factually correct when I am at peace. I still see the danger, and the lies, rejection of God, hostility, and fakeness.]

I have written that people should come into tune with God, but who and what is God? Is "God" the loving creator of the universe, who holds us to the highest standards, a person who loves and dies for us? Or is "God" community, the set of all people around us? Between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (or the Speaker and Legitimacy), and community, which is more omnipotent? Who do I fear more? God seems to be shackled by community, or by the way that community's members collectively construct how they will trust -- what the definition of "crazy" is, what images of God are socially acceptable to believe in, how hard to try to know the truth.

Defining morality as prosociality simply sets up the community as God. But if there is a real God, a person who loves us more than community can, who is the truth, then prosociality is a dangerous thing, a seductive lie.

So these are the stakes with which a person should approach a book like *Teaching Children to Care*, which is a book about getting children to behave, to like each other, and so on, apart from any mention of God. If Ruth Sidney Charney, the author, believes in God, she can't show it in a public school classroom. Instead, she has to deal with the behavioral issues right in front of her, or the classroom will not be a place of learning and

work. So she instills in her students a responsiveness to each other and to her, and teaches them the Golden Rule -- do to other people what you would have them do to you. No mention has been made, or can be made, of Jesus, who spoke that rule. She mentions how morality is bigger than us, not something we create -- is she talking about God when she says "morality"? Or is morality really just "I want to please my teacher because I'm a child and it's a human instinct, and whatever she says, I want to do"? The teacher creates morality but doesn't teach children to love God. She doesn't explain where morality comes from, because, perhaps, if she tried, it would undermine morality. She speaks with implications rather than straight out, asks leading questions rather than baldly stating, so that children internalize what she says, and so that they can't fight back. They don't have the mental development to construct alternate systems of their own, but perhaps they could see through hers intuitively, or have the kind of powerful skepticism of those who don't understand a set of explanations, if she offered explicit explanations. But she doesn't. Implications are more psychologically effective, and she's convinced that the ends justify the means.

So children are indoctrinated to be deeply moral (or that is the attempt), and yet to find God peripheral or nonexistent. Morality, which I think is difficult to ground in anything other than God, is simply not grounded and becomes a free-floating force in people's mind. Not to be thought about explicitly -- if we did so we would either become nihilists or truly committed to morality (and thus out of tune with society). But instead this unspeakable force. I wonder if secular people who are moral realists are convinced that morality must be "out there" simply by the psychological force of having been taught to be moral when they were young, apart from rationality. And perhaps morality is, practically speaking, not seen as something that needs rational grounding, because it has been ingrained in us so much. This kind of moral education may explain both moral realism and moral anti-realism among secular people.

This may make it sound like I didn't like Charney, but I think she makes, or made, the kind of teacher I would have liked. She is a passionate teacher. I can recommend her book as a way to understand passion, something I think is essential. While her emphasis on passion could lead someone to God, her emphasis on prosocial, arational morality threatens to lead people away from God. So she is a mixed phenomenon.

Part of how I am feeling now comes from bipolar disorder, I can tell. No matter what I have going on my life, when I feel low, I feel low. This is the content of my low thinking, given what I have lived so far. When I am not blinded by the depression, I can understand fully how it is that I can keep going. But for now, I can rest a bit, knowing that I have written some of my thoughts on the book I read. I think, maybe, I won't read it again to look for the supporting quotes to what I said above. But I can recommend

reading the book, for its passion, if you want to check my work.

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One additional thing I remember thinking as I read was about how, given how beautiful and effective Charney's methods sound, why could they not be used on the elites of the world, so that, perhaps, they could bring the countries of the world in harmony with each other? I thought, maybe because the way she talks to children is something that wouldn't work on adults. It's too artificial, too skillful. Adults want the skillfulness of a poker player, to affirm their adulthood, but not the skillfulness of a professional mom.

It made me wonder, how do we make this strange creature called *adult*? What is this being? No child is really bad, we say, but some children grow up to become bad adults. A child can hardly set himself or herself up against his or her family. But the leader of a nation can. They can shape themselves into their own being, and shut down every human feeling, can listen to other people speak and know that they will never agree with them, and go on with their agenda. They can decide who they want to be and then be it, taking the responsibility for it, suffering for it, and still continuing to choose it, despite what other people think. Children try to say "no", but adults sometimes can actually succeed in saying "no".

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(later)

One thing Charney talks about is how she isn't trying to punish children, simply have them see the consequences to their actions.

What if adults were shown the consequences of their actions? So often, the natural consequences of people's actions fall due not in their own lives, but in others. What if some teacher could help adults see the effects of what they do?

Adults think that being shown the moral way, having someone say "you should know better" is a thing of youth. Now that they are older, they are past that. Adults can no longer do wrong.

Now, there are certain things that an adult can do wrong. Everyone knows what those things are. We all agree on that. But the things that we don't all agree are wrong, are not to be enforced, and not even to be called wrong, so we don't have to think of them as wrong, so, in our heads, they are not wrong.

Adulthood as a collective can't be taught. It knows. A reshaping of adult values by being shown the consequences of adult behavior can't be done, it seems. So maybe the moral thing to do is to fit into the constructed adult reality, be good at being one of the tribe of adults?

But, the consequences don't go away... how will we take into account the real effects of what we do (and don't do) if we don't listen to the truth?

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I wouldn't mind my life so much if it weren't for the bipolar disorder. Writing isn't so bad, and when I'm euthymic, I feel fine. I can hear some imaginary (or real) readers being solicitous for me when hearing about my bipolar disorder. They seem to (or really do) care about me so much and wish that I would take care of myself. But if they care about a person's well-being, I have a great opportunity for them. They can save up $5,000, donate to Against Malaria Foundation, and thereby save someone in the developing world from a painful death from malaria, which would have orphaned their children and widowed their spouse, and diminished their extended family and weakened the national economy. (It's even worth donating $50.) Or, this imaginary or real person who is moved by my bipolar disorder is a Christian and thinks that the second death is worse than the first (which, basically I agree with, although I do give money to global development), they can give a much smaller amount of money -- apparently, $1 -- to Doulos Partners and that should cause [or allow] one person to start to become a disciple of Jesus. Do you think that these charities might not be the best ones to donate to? You can look for better ones. You could even just give money directly to people who are worse off than you, if you can't find any trustworthy charities.

If you have time but not money, you can think of some way to use your time to help people. If nothing else, you can seek to make one new friend, and be a good friend to them.

But you may not have any time or money to spare. Some people don't. Then at least adopt the identity of a "person who cares", who would donate your time and money if you could, so that when someone enters your life who is more deeply involved in caring, you can offer them the welcome of your validation of what they are into, instead of passive-aggressive or blatant hostility, or indifference.

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The title of the book I read is *Teaching Children to Care*. To me, I thought of "caring" as "feeling and acting strongly", more as "exerting effort to do good, work on a good-making project". But the book mostly emphasizes "seeing other people as people" and the Golden Rule. A way to reconcile these two meanings is to think of God, who is personally blessed by large-scale altruistic efforts, in the way that if you share your lunch with someone, they are personally blessed by your personal thoughtfulness and the consequence of their hunger being alleviated.

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One thing that makes adults resistant to new morality is that they have reached the developmental stage where they are their own person and they have their own boundaries, and they are secure in themselves. Or, that they have not reached that stage yet, and are vulnerable to being hacked by other people (or demons) and thus are resistant to attempts to change them. A secure person is not threatened by morality and so does not change, while an insecure person is threatened and so shuts it down.

Somehow it is possible for a secure person to take into account morality -- maybe through a discipline of fearing being trapped by your own security. Both a secure and an insecure person can find their rest in caring, in the interrelationship of all things to each other and to them, as opposed to, in the secure person's case, their own stability and boundaries. Presumably the insecure person, on some deep level, has no place to rest.

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[Response:]

I thought I should go into more detail about moral realism.

> [Secular moral realists may have a strong intuition that morality is "out there" and this intuition is the basis of their sense that morality is real, despite whatever difficulties in grounding it rationally (or lack of having tried to do so). They would deny the intuition that people have that God exists as being valid, but they do trust and honor the intuition that morality exists.]
>
> [Secular moral anti-realists may have no qualms, and little difficulty, in "being good people". "You know, C. denies that morality even exists. But he's a good guy." They can, in unreflective moments, feel that morality is real. They can even get mad at injustice. They can devote their lives to doing good. But then they go back to the study of their minds (like Hume's study where he can be skeptical) and say "but none of it's real!".]
>
> [Morality is an area where we seem to have agreed to be irrational, to not try to connect all the dots or demand that all the dots be connected, even beyond the background level of irrationality that attends most human endeavors. ("This thing makes you change what you do. You spend hours and hours, thousands of dollars to comply with this thing. It's not just how you feel -- it's something you have to obey. You just know that you have to obey it, no person or other visible

force or situation makes you obey it. And you can't explain what it is, how it fits into the rest of reality -- or, you even say it's an illusion?") And, perhaps that acceptance of irrationality is because we have had morality ingrained in us in a subtextual way, or the instinctualness of morality is encouraged, but not accompanied by reason, when we attend secular public schools (or even religious ones that don't make God real to students sufficiently), or have parents who are helpless in explaining a rational grounding to moral realism to us when we are young.]

> [Maybe we can at least explain where moral instincts come from -- evolution? (Why should we trust how we have evolved? Evolution helped us to survive in early environments?) Or we can say that they are heuristics for survival. (Why should we survive?) But then, if we are the "1%", why redistribute wealth? The 1% could probably maximize its survival best by not redistributing wealth. Or, a related question: does promoting animal welfare really lead to human survival? Often it is orthogonal to human survival. I think morality could come from evolution but does not necessarily serve the purpose of human survival. Maybe some people have genes that make them ethically oriented? Then why not shut them off? Does morality really have value? To answer that question, I think we need a moral realism.]
>
> [Maybe morality is just maximization of value, by definition of "morality" and "value". Then, can we explain that voice that says, for each valuable thing X, "X is valuable"? Or is that also irrational, just a random "monkey on your back"?]

[I don't think I'm being fair to secular moral realists. I should at least explain why I think moral realism is hard to ground in anything other than God. Secular moral realists may be able to come up with a satisfying account of how moral realism is grounded.]

[How would they do that? Do we start with "these are our moral intuitions, now we have to find some metaphysical belief that lets us keep them"? But what if there's something wrong with our moral intuitions? One of the main points of having a grounding for moral realism is to know

what particular things are moral, now that we know where morality comes from. I am generally relatively more of a thinker and writer than a reader. So I tend to work with first principles (or personal experience). But I did read *The Feeling of Value* by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette and remember that I had mixed feelings about it. I thought that it probably was successful in showing that some kind of experiential states can be known to be bad, just because they feel like badness, and some can be known to be good, just because they feel like goodness. I'm not sure I would be so charitable now. At least, without going back and looking to see the details there, I think "why should our perceptions of good and bad be transcendentally valid?".]

[A moral realism needs to be usefully thick, if we are going to guide our lives by it. You can always posit something like the (unfortunately named) "morons", "moral particles", and I can say, "fine, now we know where morality comes from, some kind of ontologically real substance of morality". Now what? We need to know something about these moral particles in order to know what is actually moral to do and be.]

[I don't know if there are any better secular moral realisms than Rawlette's, but at least hers is usefully thick. Hedonism (what she advocates for) is a somewhat useful guide to life. (Maybe that is what is so seductive and dangerous about it, that it's easily agreed-on for "practical purposes" while not really being in tune with reality.)]

[My approach to moral realism, as of now, is to say, "An ontologically real substance of morality exists. Everything that, practically speaking, exists, is conscious. (Only consciousness can interact with consciousness.) This means that the ontologically real substance of morality is conscious. Morality is about a standard which applies. For something to exist, it must ought to exist. It must live up to that standard. That things exist proves that morality exists and is being satisfied. The way that conscious beings metaphysically contact other beings is for their consciousnesses to overlap, for them to experience exactly the same experience. Morality metaphysically contacts everything that exists in order to validate it so that it can exist. So morality experiences exactly what we do, and finds the 'qualia of goodness or ought-to-be-ness' ('pleasure') good, at least on a first-order level, and similarly with the 'qualia of badness or ought-not-to-be-ness' ('pain'). This validates a lot of Rawlette's account.]

["But we know a few things more about morality. For instance, morality has to be self-consistent. Like us, it has to put morality first. So it has to put itself first. But it has to put itself first as an other, as a law it submits to. Thinking of morality as having two aspects, the enforcer of the standard and the standard itself, allows us to see that morality has to be willing to put aside everything, including its own existence, for the sake of its standard. If it ceases to be willing to do that, it is not self-consistent and it ceases to be valid, destroying everything by being invalid (no longer moral, and thus unable to validate anything).]

["Part of morality's self-consistency is that it must have the same values as itself. Everything that exists has value, it ought to be, either temporarily or permanently. (What is bad must someday cease to exist.) Morality must be on the side of value, and must value everything that is of value for what it is. Morality values persons in that they are persons, this personal valuing being called love. Morality must love in order to be self-consistent and thus valid. It loves that humans are in tune with it so that they can exist permanently. To love a person fully involves understanding the person's being fully, and that full understanding can only come from kinship. So morality is a person (a person who is also kin to animals).]

> ["Everything is the expression of a will, either that of morality, or of a free-willed being whose will is willed by morality. To be is to will. So impersonal beings are parts of personal beings and don't have independent reality. They are valued as parts of personal beings, and with those beings morality has kinship, not with their parts taken separately.]

["Morality has to be willing to bear the burden of what it imposes on others. If it's worth it for a human to pay a certain cost for morality's sake, it's worth it for morality to pay it as well, if possible. Morality already experiences every burden that is part of our experienced lives, by being conscious of what we are conscious of, but there is a further burden that each of us experiences, which is to experience *only* our own lives and deaths, without the comfort of knowing the bigger picture. How can morality bear that burden? Morality is composed of multiple persons, one of whom experiences everything, another, who does not and can live a finite life (the first maintains the moral universe through his/her validation of everything during the time the second lives a finite life)."]

[As you might have guessed already, "morality" in the above could be considered "God".]

[If we accept the above (or perhaps a better-argued version of it...), we have a concept of morality that largely supersedes hedonism. It incorporates hedonism and its recommendations, at least insofar as it validates the first-order goodness/badness of pleasure/pain (if pleasure has baked into it the perception that it ought to be, and pain, the perception that it ought not to be), as well as answering why it is that care for hedonic states is transcendentally valid. Further, we are recommended to be willing to give up everything for what is right, and thus to risk ourselves for that when it is called for. And we are to bear the burdens of those we rule over, as much as we can. It might be possible be able to come up with other ways to thicken the very concept of moral legitimacy, so that we know more about what morality must be, and thus what we must do or be in order to be moral. This thickness is a useful guide. And, if we think that this person or persons who are morality exist, they may have

acted in history, and we may try to find evidence of where they might have spoken, allowing us to thicken our concept even further, although with less certainty.]

[To defend my earlier statement, I think that it's hard for me to imagine a successful secular / atheistic moral realism, because what I see as the way to ground moral realism involves the existence of God, and the (perhaps unrepresentatively few) secular moral realisms I've seen are not satisfying to me intellectually. Maybe if I want to strengthen what I say further, putting it briefly, I would say that if morality exists, it must love fully, and that kind of love is something that persons do. So then, morality is a person, and the word for a person like that is "God".]

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22 September 2023:

When I wrote this post I thought that bipolar disorder was my big problem. However, now that I am more over the ways people have traumatized me and programmed me with the ways they wanted me to think, I see that those are a much bigger deal than my bipolar disorder. My bipolar symptoms, without those traumatized and programmed thoughts, are fairly mild.

Labels: #adulthood, #altruism, #axizeiology, #book review, #childhood, #education, #God, #kinship, #love, #mental health, #metaethics, #morality, #politics, #rationality, #Ruth Sidney Charney, #social connection, #social pressure, #truth

Notes for Long Reflection Reading List

%notes-for-long-reflection-reading-list

Wednesday, September 28, 2022

These are notes on my readings on the Long Reflection, except for the two books, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, and *Teaching Children to Care* by Ruth Sidney Charney (those two links are to their reviews).

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Thinking Complete (Richard Ngo) "Making decisions under multiple worldviews"

[I decided to come back to this one later and restart reading it.]

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Felix Stocker Reflecting on the Long Reflection

I find myself persuaded (although I'm not a tough audience) from this that the Long Reflection is not a practical pursuit, if it is a top-down discrete era of human history. That is, if it's something we impose on everyone, then we are doing so against someone's will, and they may defect, breaking the discrete era. Also I am (easily) persuaded by Stocker's objections that people will desire technology that the Long Reflection would try to hold back, and stopping human technological desire risks creating an S-risk of its own, the global hegemon. But, I do think that reflecting on what are the best values, and seeking to influence and be influenced by everyone to create (ideally) some kind of harmony in human values (or reduction of disharmony that allows for a more ideal "liberal" solution to the coordination questions that the Long Reflection is trying to answer) is something that can be ongoing. I would call this "cultural altruism", or a subset of cultural altruism. Much of what Ord and MacAskill would want could be pursued in a bottom-up, intermingled way and avoid some (or all?) of Stocker's objections.

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Paul Christiano Decoupling deliberation from competition

Christiano makes the point that deliberation can be infected by competition. This would affect a bottom-up cultural altruism scene. However, I hope that a social scene can absorb a certain amount of

competitiveness without harming it. For instance, when we try to find truth, we (society) sometimes hire lawyers to argue each side of a case and then we listen to what they say. Innovators in thinking may be motivated by competition, but as long as they are also evaluators (are both "soldiers" and "scouts"), or enough people who have power are "scouts", the competition only serves to provide ideas (or bring to light evidence) to select from, which is a good thing when you are trying to find the overall truth. When competitive people shut other people up, or have state-level or "megacorp-level" mind control / propaganda powers, then competition is bad for deliberation. But humans competing with and listening to humans on a human scale is good for deliberation. "All" we have to do is keep states and corporations from being too powerful.

I imagine cultural altruism being something like "status quo truth-finding but X% more effective". Our current truth-finding culture is (from one perspective) pretty good at bringing about truth, or at least, truths. Look how many we've accumulated. (Maybe where it needs to be better is in finding a whole to truth. And maybe we should think of how to protect it.)

I don't think I'm talking about the same thing Christiano is. I think he's talking about how AI teams can deliberate despite race dynamics, or something like that. Whereas what I imagine is everybody (all humans, more or less) interacting with each other without real time pressure. But it's interesting to think, where exactly is the distinction between Christiano's part of culture and the rest of culture? Isn't cultural work being done, perhaps that would affect human culture in general (more my concern) by Christiano's fairly pragmatic and craft-affected tactics for fostering deliberation despite race dynamics? Isn't pragmatic, resource- and time-constrained life where values come from? Christiano's situation is just another of many human situations.

In the section "A double-edged sword", Christiano talks about the practical benefits of competition to weed out bad deliberators (their influence, not them as persons). I suppose this feels realistic to him. To me, I feel (maybe naively) that ideal deliberators would stop fearing each other and simply fear the truth. If lives are at stake, because ideal deliberators index themselves to the saving of lives or whatever is of highest value, they would naturally work their best, and if this can be known, defer to people who know better. But Christiano has lived in his part of the real world, where people are resource- and time-constrained, and implicitly or not thinks that it generally has to be competition that gets the job done of communicating reality to people, and not an innate indexing-to-reality. I assume (if he really does believe that innate indexing-to-reality is not an option, or hasn't thought of it) that his beliefs in some necessity or desirability of competition are connected with his limited personal experience. Christiano may not see the possibility that people can be ideal deliberators, or that a culture of ideal deliberation could be fostered, given

enough time. (His context, again, seems to be of specific, relatively near-term situations.)

Maybe if people are mistaken about their own competence in judging whether to defer, that would be one reason why there would need to be some outside actor who pushed them to relate to the truth better, and this can never be fixed. (Would people in such a context be "competed away" by a wild and more or less impersonal social force ("competition"), or would there be a person who could tell them they were wrong, who knew how to talk to them and who could at least consciously attempt to make themselves trustworthy to the "deluded one"? Perhaps for many of us it is more bearable to be ruined by "competition" than to be corrected by a person we know. Of course, it is always possible that the people who correct us are themselves wrong. Maybe that's the appeal of competition, that in some sense it can't be wrong -- if you're not fit, you're not fit. But then competition itself distorts reality, at least through "Moloch".)

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Finished the main article, now reading the comments (what's there as of 22 August 2022).

Wei Dai makes the point that without competition, cultures's norms can randomly drift. (I would add:) this is sort of like how in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, once war goes away, totalitarian states can "make" $2 + 2 = 5$. I've thought there could could be problems with digital humans coming up with beliefs like $2 + 2 = 5$. But at the same time, Moloch distorts our thinking and our lives as well. So it seems like we're doomed either way to someday not living in reality.

However, believing that $2 + 2 = 5$ is physically difficult. Probably because of how the human brain is wired -- and we can change that. But either the human brain is in tune with the truth (more or less; enough to found reason) or it's not, and it always has, or hasn't, been. If it's not, then why worry about deliberation going well, or being in tune with reality? We never had a chance, and our current sense of what is rational isn't valid anyway, or we don't have a strong reason to believe that it is. But if it is, then the solution is just to keep people's brains about like they have always been, and use that as the gold standard for the foundations of rationality (at least the elements that are or are more or less like axioms, which are the easy, basic elements of rationality, even if building sufficiently complex thought-structures could go beyond human capabilities).

If it is the case that our innate thinking is not in tune with reality (on the level of the foundational axioms of reason), can we know what to do? Maybe not, and if not, then we have no guidance from the possible world in which our innate thinking is invalid. So if we are uncertain between

that scenario and the one where it is valid (or valid-enough), then since the valid-scenario's recommendations might have some connection with reality, we should follow them.

It does seem odd to me that I should so neatly argue for the status quo, and that the human brain (or, I would say, human thinking, feeling, intuiting, perceiving, etc. nature, of which the brain is a phenomenal manifestation) should be the gold standard of how we know. Can't we be fallible? It makes perfect sense that we could be. But practically speaking, we're stuck in our own world, and lost if we leave it.

(This seems like a bit of a new view for me, so I should think about it some more.)

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Wei Dai says, later on --Currently, people's thinking and speech are in large part ultimately motivated by the need to signal intelligence[link], loyalty, wealth[link], or other "positive" attributes[link], which help to increase one's social status and career prospects, and attract allies and mates, which are of course hugely important forms of resources, and some of the main objects of competition among humans.--

I'm not sure if this is how things seem to people subjectively, or if rather they feel like (or are) motivated by love for their family and friends, or some higher good. They have to work for resources due to scarcity, and because if they don't, they won't be able to live or provide for the people they love. Maybe it is the case that even love is something that is really "ultimately" motivated by resource acquisition? If a person is aware of this, can they willfully choose love (or value, or rationality) against resource acquisition? Probably they can. (Rationalists can choose against their biases, so why couldn't other people make as strong a choice?) We might suppose that most people are stuck in survival mode, or don't think much further than just their immediate friends and family. But maybe that's an artifact of scarcity, ambient culture, and them not being educated to see the bigger picture.

If you think that everything is about resource acquisition, that is what the world will be. If you think everything is about love / truth / valuing, etc., that is what the world will be. Some people have to face the world as it currently is, and it bends their thinking toward short-term, strategic, self-interested, competitive, resource-scarce, resource-hungry thinking. But some people are free from that, whether through temperament or life situation (perhaps they are too "untalented" to be able to do anything practical in the world as it is, and can only work on the world as it should be). These are the people who can and should lead the way in deliberation, in that, their minds are actually capable of deliberation. In areas of deliberation, the practical elites should be inclined to defer to

them.

I checked the links in Wei Dai's comment (quoted above). They were about how unconscious drives (especially including the ones that drive signaling) really control people. I am subject to such drives all the time. But do they really matter in the long run? I am able to pursue what I choose to pursue. Perhaps my drive to seek a mate gives me the energy to seek a spouse -- and all that comes along with it, including new non-romantic interests, and a new perspective on who exists in the world. I get to choose which traits I find desirable in a spouse, even if the drive is not chosen. Or, if those have to "pay rent" by giving me the prospect of status, I get to choose, between the different sources of status that are roughly equal in expected yield, which of them I pursue. I can be intentional and conscious on the margin, and steer my psychological machinery vehicle in the direction that I want to go. The whole concept of "overcoming bias" and being rationalist doesn't make sense if this isn't possible, and I don't see why that level of intentionality is, or could only be, confined to a tiny subculture (tiny by global population standards). I think that short-term, competitive, resource-hungry, etc. thinking is like that evolutionarily-driven unconscious-drives side of being human, and the truly deliberative is like, or in some sense is the same as, the intentional, subjective, conscious, rational side.

I am suspicious that the unconscious mind doesn't even exist. Where would such a mind reside, if not in some other mind's consciousness? Can willing really come from anything other than an existing being, and can an existing being be anything other than conscious? I am skeptical that there is a world other than the conscious world (more than skeptical, but for the sake of argument, I would only suggest skepticism to my imagined reader here). Given this skepticism, we should be concerned that we are being trolled by evil spirits, or, more optimistically, are being led by wiser and better spirits than we are. Which side wins when we see things in a cynical or mechanistic way? I feel like cynicism and mechanistic thinking make me less intentional and more fatalistic, more likely to give in to my impulses and programming. Since my intentions seem to line up (at least directionally) with what wiser and better spirits would want, I should protect my intention and strengthen it, and see the possibility of free will, and be idealistic.

I suppose a (partial) summary of the above would be to say "deliberative people should be idealistic, conscious, believe in consciousness, despite 'the way the world works'". Maybe the Long Reflection (or cultural altruism) is concerned with determining what really should be, and some other groups or processes are needed to determine what can be, in the world that we observe and have to live in up close.

I think the New Wine worldview is one that inclines people toward being cultural altruists, and less so toward being EAs or the like, because it has a

sense that the absolute best is the absolute minimum [in the sense that if you attain the absolute best on the New Wine account, you have only attained the bare minimum] and that there is a long time to pursue it, and that physical death ("the first death") is not as significant.

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Cold Takes (Holden Karnofsky) Futureproof Ethics:

Karnofsky says --our ethical intuitions are sometimes "good" but sometimes "distorted." Distortions might include:
* When our ethics are pulled toward what's convenient for us to believe. For example, that one's own nation/race/sex is superior to others, and that others' interests can therefore be ignored or dismissed.--

Is it a distortion for our ethics to be pulled toward what is convenient for us to believe? Why does Karnofsky think that's true? I agree with Karnofsky on this thought (with some reservations, but substantially), but even if everyone did, why would that mean that we had found the truth? (I think a proxy for "I am speaking the truth" is "I am saying something that nobody in my social circle will disagree with" -- but it's an imperfect proxy.) Can Karnofsky root his preference in reason? I think that the truth is known by God, and sometimes thinking convenient ways will lead us toward believing what God believes, but sometimes it leads away. God is the standard of truth because he is the root standard of everything. So there is something "out there" which too much convenient thinking will take a person away from. Is there anything "out there" for Karnofsky's thinking to be closer or further from, due to distorted thinking? If not, does it make sense to call the distortions "distortions", or rather, "undesired changes"? (But without the loading we put on "undesired" to mean "objectively bad".)

Karnofsky clarifies a bit with --It's very debatable what it means for an ethical view to be "not distorted." Some people ("moral realists") believe that there are literal ethical "truths," while others (what I might call "moral quasi-realists," including myself) believe that we are simply trying to find patterns in what ethical principles we would embrace if we were more thoughtful, informed, etc.[link]--

I should check the link when I have time and come back [later: I did and didn't feel like it changed anything for me], but what I read in that quote is something like "Some people are moral realists, but I'm not. I'm a moral quasi-realist. I look for patterns in what ethical principles we would embrace if we were more thoughtful, informed, etc. Because thoughtfulness, informedness, etc. is a guide to how we ought to behave. It rightly guides us to the truth, and being rightly guided toward the truth is what we ought to be. Maybe it helps us survive, and surviving is what we ought to do." Which sounds like Karnofsky believes in an ethical truth, but

for some reason he doesn't want to call himself a moral realist. Maybe being a moral realist involves "biting some bullets" that he doesn't want to "bite"?

[That characterization sounds unfair. Can't I take Karnofsky at his word? I think what makes me feel like he's doing something like using smoke and mirrors is that the whole subject of morality is pointless unless it compels behavior. Morality is when we come to see or feel that something ought to be done, and ideally (from the perspective of the moral idea) do it. So if Karnofsky ends up seeing and feeling that things ought to be done, or intends for others to see or feel that things ought to be done, even if it doesn't make sense to say that "ought" exists from his official worldview, then he's being moral, and relying on the truth of morality to motivate himself and other people. "Thoughtful" and "informed" are loaded in our society as being "trustworthy", so they do moral work without having to say explicitly "this is what you ought to do". So Karnofsky gets the motivational power of morality while still denying that it exists beyond some interesting patterns in psychology. I guess if he's really consistent in saying that he's just looking at patterns of thinking that emerge from "thoughtfulness and informedness", and "thoughtfulness and informedness" have no inherent moral recommending power, then he should say "hey, I'm saying a lot of words here which might cause you to think things, feel things, and do things, but actually, none of them matter and they have no reason to affect you that deeply. In fact, nothing can matter, because if it did, it would create morality -- what matters should be protected, or guarded against, or something -- and morality is just patterns of what we would believe if we were thoughtful and informed, which themselves have no power to recommend or compel behavior". Does Karnofsky really want to be seen as someone whose words do not need to be heeded?]

[This is quickly written and I have not read in depth what Karnofsky thinks about moral quasi-realism, which I'm guessing might be sort of the same as Lukas Gloor's anti-realism? I did read Gloor's moral anti-realism sequence (or at least the older posts, written before 2022). With Gloor's position, I also got the feeling of smoke and mirrors.]

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Karnofsky summarizing John Harsanyi:
--Let's start with a basic, appealing-seeming principle for ethics: that it should be **other-centered**.--

Why should that be a foundation of ethics? It's merely "basic" and "appealing-seeming". It certainly is more popular than egoism -- or maybe, given our revealed preferences, egoism is a very popular moral foundation. Maybe egoism and altruism are supposed to compete with each other -- that looks like what we actually choose, minus a few exceptional individuals. Nietzsche wrote a number of books arguing in favor of egoism

[as superior to altruism, as far as I could tell], and I can think of two other egoist thinkers (Stirner (I've read his *The Ego and His Own*) and Rand (whom I have not read but have heard of)). Are they "not even wrong", or do they have to be dealt with? Supposedly futureproof ethics is about what you would believe if you had more reflection. Maybe if you're part of the 99%, the more you reflect, the more you feel like a democratic-leaning thing like utilitarianism is a good thing. But if you're part of the 1%, and you're aware of Nietzsche's philosophy, maybe the more you reflect, the more true it seems that the *strong should master the weak*, based on the objective fact that the *strong are stronger* and *power by its very nature takes power*. There is a certain simplicity to those beliefs. So then will there be a democratic morality and an aristocratic one, both the outcome of greater reflection? Or maybe an AI reflects centuries per second on the question, and comes up with a Nietzschean conclusion. Is the AI wrong?

Personally, I lean utilitarian (at this point in my life) because I believe that God loves each person, by virtue of him valuing everything that is valuable. Everything that exists is valuable, and whatever can exist forever should. [Some beings turn out not to be able to exist forever, by their choice, not God's.] He experiences the loss of all lost value, and so does not want any to be lost. We are all created with the potential to be saved forever. So there is a field of altruism with respect to all persons. Perhaps animals (and future AI) are (or will) really be personal beings in some sense which God also values and relates to universally.

[Utilitarianism is about the benefit of the whole, tends toward impartiality, and is based on aggregation. God relates to each person, which accomplishes what aggregation sets out to do, bringing everything into one reality. God tends toward impartiality, and works for his personal interest, the whole.]

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Karnofsky talks about how --The strange conclusions [brought about by utilitarianism + sentientism] feel uncomfortable, but **when I try to examine why they feel uncomfortable, I worry that a lot of my reasons just come down to "avoiding weirdness" or "hesitating to care a great deal about creatures very different from me and my social peers."** These are exactly the sorts of thoughts I'm trying to get away from, if I want to be ahead of the curve on ethics.--

However, the discomfort we feel from "strange conclusions" could also be us connecting to some sense that "there's something more than this". I remember the famous Yudkowsky quote ([which he] borrowed from someone else, whom I should look up when I have time) of something like "That which can be destroyed by the truth should be". But the reality for us, if we are the destroyers, is that in effect it is "Whatever can be destroyed by the truth as I currently understand it, should be". So, if we

decide to destroy our passage to whatever our intuitions of diffidence were trying to tell us, perhaps by erasing the intuitions, maybe we have destroyed some truth by committing to what we think must be true, counter-intuitively true. We should probably hold out for some other truth, when our intuitions revolt, because they might be saying something.

[The quote seems to originate with P. C. Hodgell]

I believe that eternal salvation dominates all other ethical concerns, as a matter of course. Unbearable suffering in itself is bad because God has to experience it, and it is for him what it is for any other being: unbearable. What God, the standard, finds unbearable, will be rejected by him, and what is rejected by the standard is illegitimate. We should be on the side of reducing unbearable suffering. If we are, then we are more in tune with God and thus more fit for eternal life. I would agree with Karnofsky in the goal of ending factory farming, although it's not my highest priority. But, I think, from my point of view, it's valuable to look at Karnofsky's worldview, the one which so strongly and counter-intuitively urges us that "the thing that matters is the suffering of sentient beings" with some suspicion. Strong moral content says "this is 'The Answer'", but to have "The Answer" too soon, before you have really found the real answer, is dangerous. I don't think anyone is trying to scam me by presenting that urgent psychological *thing* to me, but I think it could be a scam in effect if it distracts me from the ways in which our eternal salvation and our relationships with God are at stake, and really matter the most.

[I suppose I'm saying that the theistic worldview is more satisfying to hold in one's head; satisfies, more or less, Karnofsky's concerns with animals; and would be missed if I said "okay, utilitarianism + sentientism must be right no matter what", so that I go against my intuitions of discomfort, even ones which might somehow intuit that there should be a better worldview out there.]

When people are forceful with you and try to override your intuitions, that's a major red flag. Although counter-intuitive truths may exist, we should be cautious with things that try to override our intuitions. In fact, things that are too counter-intuitive simply can't be believed -- we have no choice but to see them as false. This is the foundation of how we go about reasoning.

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Should I feel confident that I have futureproof ethics? No, I guess not. I do think that according to my own beliefs, it's clear that I could, if I were only consistent with my beliefs. But my beliefs could be wrong. I don't know that, and currently can't know that. This goes for Karnofsky as well. The best you can do is approach the question with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and be open to revision. Maybe then you can hold

better beliefs within your lifetime, which is the best you can do.

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Cold Takes (Holden Karnofsky) "Defending One-Dimensional Ethics"

As I read this, I think that this post may be mostly not on the topic of the Long Reflection.

However, since I'm reading it, I will say that I think in Karnofsky's "would you choose a world in which 100 million people get a day at the beach if that meant 1 person died a tragic death?" scenario, I would probably say, if someone asked me "do you want to go to the beach if there's some chance that it caused someone to die a tragic death?", it might make me question how necessary the pleasure of the beach was to me. If there were 100 million people like me on the beach, and we all somehow knew without a doubt that if we stayed on the beach, one person would die a tragic death, and that we all thought the same, we would all get off the beach. How could pleasure seem worth anything compared to someone else's life? Arguably, in real life, 100 million beach afternoons make us all so much more effective at life that many more lives are saved by our recreation. But I don't think that's the thought experiment.

Does my intuition pass the "veil of ignorance" test? If I don't know who I'm going to be, would I rather be the person who went to the beach, and somehow all else being equal that was 1/100 millionth of the share of someone else dying, or would I rather save the one person? What's so great about the beach? It's just some nice sounding waves and a breeze. Maybe as a San Diegan, I've had my fill of beach and a different analogy would work better. Let's say I could go hear a Bach concert. Well, Bach is just a bunch of nice notes. I like Bach, and have listened to him on and off since I was a teenager. He is the artist I am most interested in right now, someone whose concert I would want to attend. (I'm not just using him as a "canonical example".) But, Bach is just a bunch of nice notes, after all.

I find that the thought of someone not dying is refreshing, in a way that Bach isn't. I can't say I have no natural appetite for the non-ethical, which I may have to address somehow, but it's not clear to me that producing a lot of "non-ethical" value (if that makes sense) is easily comparable to producing "ethical" value. We are delighted with things and experiences when we are children, but when we see things through the frame of reality, lives are what count.

[By "lives" I mean something like "people", and people exist when they are alive. (And I think that non-humans can matter, as well, as people, although I'm not sure I've thought through that issue in enough depth.)]

Now, that's my appetites, and thus, I guess, my preferences in some sense. But what does that have to with moral reality? I guess one way to look at

morality is that it's really just a complicated way to coordinate preferences, and there is no real "ought" to the matter. So then it would make sense to perform thought experiments like the veil of ignorance. But as a moral realist (a theistic moral realist), I believe that my "life-over-experience-and-things" intuition lines up with what I think God would want, which is for his children to live. Their things and experiences are trivial for him to recreate, but their hearts and thus their lives are not. God simply is the moral truth, a person who is the moral truth, and what he really wants necessarily is what is valuable.

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jasoncrawford's EA Forum post What does moral progress consist of?

I chose this post for this reading list hoping that the title indicated it would be an examination or questioning of the very concept of moral progress. But I wouldn't have chosen it if I had read it. But now that I think about it, maybe I can make something of it.

I guess the part about how Enlightenment values and liberalism are necessary for progress (of any sort), might mean that somehow we would need the Enlightenment baked into any Long Reflection, as the Long Reflection is an attempt at moral progress (seeking better values). Perhaps looking at values as an object of thought comes out of the Enlightenment, historically at least? Or the idea of progress (perhaps) was "invented" in the Enlightenment, and can only make sense given Enlightenment ideas, like reason and liberalism? I can tentatively say that I'm okay with the idea that Enlightenment influence is necessary for progress, and that I'm in favor of progress, if I can mix other things with the Enlightenment, like deeply theistic values. And, I think that any other stakeholder in world values who is not secular, would want that or something equivalent.

(I'm not sure I can endorse or reject the claim that the Enlightenment could be an essential part of progress, given what I know.)

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rosehadshar on EA Forum How moral progress happens: the decline of footbinding as a case study

What I will try to use from this post is the idea that moral progress comes through both economic incentives changing, and people deliberately engaging in campaigns to change behaviors and norms.

The Long Reflection, I would guess, will not occur in isolation from culture. If it proceeds according to my assumption that it is done both rationally and intuitively by all people, and not just rationally by a cadre of philosophers, then campaigns of moral progress will be part of the "computation" of the Long Reflection. All those people adopting the

apparently morally superior values would be the human race deciding that certain moral values were better than others, offering their testimony in favor of the new values, thus (at least partially) validating them, just as the cadre of philosophers, when they agree on premises, all testify to the values that follow from those premises.

Economic changes affect how people approach reality on the level of trusting and valuing. I would guess that in cultures with material scarcity and political disestablishedness, people would have a stronger feeling of necessity -- thus, more of a sense of meaning, and less of a sense of generosity. And the reverse being true of cultures as they have less material scarcity and more political establishedness. It might be very difficult to preserve a sense of necessity in a post-scarcity future, and this would affect everyone, except maybe those who deliberately rejected post-scarcity. A lack of meaning, if taken far enough, leads to nihilism, or, if it doesn't quite that far, to "pale, washed-out" values. Perhaps these would be the values naturally chosen by us after 10,000 post-ASI years. [The 10,000 years we might spend in the Long Reflection.] But just because we naturally would choose weak values, doesn't mean weak values, or a weakness in holding values, is transcendentally right. What if our scarcity-afflicted ancestors were more in tune with reality than our post-scarcity descendants (or than us, where we are with less scarcity but still some)? Can we rule out a priori that scarcity values are better than post-scarcity values? I'm guessing no. What we think is "right" or "progressive" might really just be the way economic situations have biased us. It could be the case that meaning and selfishness are transcendentally right and our economic situation pries us away from those values, deceiving us. Thus, for a really fair Long Reflection, we have to keep around, and join in, societies steeped in scarcity.

So can we really have moral progress, or is it just that biases change in a somewhat regular, long-term way, such that if we are biased to the current moral bias-set, we see the intensification of it as progress?

A cadre of philosophers will be biased from their economic and other experiential upbringing. The cadre may have either watched or was formed secondhand by TV and movies (or in the future, VR equivalents?) which are based in blowing people's minds. (Secondhand exposure to such artifacts through the cultural atmosphere shaped by those who did watch them.) You can feel something happening in your brain when you watch such mind-blowing movies as *The Matrix* and *Fight Club*, and that blown-open, dazzled, perhaps damaged mind (which might still be clever, but which loses its sense that there is such a thing as truth that matters) perhaps remains with people their whole lives. I suppose having written this, now people could try to raise a subculture of Long Reflection philosophers, who have not been shaped by TV, movies, or VR -- only books. But books condition people as well. In fact, philosophical reflection

conditions people, makes them "philosophical" about things.

Being in physical settings shapes a person. Driving a car is about taking risks and acting in time. Taking public transit is about those things too, but more so about waiting and sitting. Being in VR spaces could be about personal empowerment, flying like a bird, wonder and pleasure (I'm assuming that VR systems won't have any bizarre and terrifying glitches).

Ideally philosophy is pure truth -- but what is philosophy? Is philosophy a "left-brained" thing? Is the truth only known that way? Or is it a "right-brained" thing as well? If we are all raised somewhat similarly, we might all agree on a definition of philosophy, as, perhaps a more left-brained thing (although our premises come from intuitions, often enough). But why should we all have been raised the same way?

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Thinking Complete (Richard Ngo) Making decisions under multiple worldviews ("for real" this time)

I read this, but at this point, with the level of focus I can give, I can't go in depth on it. But it does seem to be something that some people interested in the Long Reflection should read (unless something supersedes it?). It's about what to do when you can't merge everyone's worldview into one worldview, but you still have to come up with a decision. I think it significantly possible that the Long Reflection will reach an stalemate and civilization will still have to make the decisions that the Long Reflection was supposed to help us make. While epistemic work can resolve some issues (get people on the same page / show armchair Long Reflection philosophers more evidence as to what really matters), I'm somewhat not optimistic that it will make it all the way to unity, and we will still have to decide collectively.

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Thinking Complete (Richard Ngo) Which values are stable under ontology shifts?

This is an interesting post, and perhaps three months ago, I would have written a post on this blog responding to it more in depth. It is relevant to the Long Reflection, I suppose, by saying that values may not survive changes in "ontologies" (our understanding of what things are or how they work?), and may end up seeming foreign to us.

(One thought: what is it about the new ontology that is supposed to change my mind? I would guess, some form of reason. Why should I care about reason? Why not just keep my original way of thinking? Or -- is reason the base of reality, or is it rather experience, or the experiences that a person has? My experience of happiness, and myself, are rude facts,

which reason must defer to. I can find things to be valuable just because I do, and I want to. (Maybe the best argument against my "rude fact sense of happiness" being valid is someone else's "rude fact of unhappiness" caused by that happiness of mine.) Something like the "ordinary" and the "ontological".)

[I can value whatever I want, regardless of what people say reality is, because base reality is me and my experiences, the cup I drink from that was sitting on the table next to me, my own history and personal plans. Sure, people can tell me stories about where my desires came from (evolution, of course), or about how I am not as much myself because my personal identity technically doesn't exist if I follow some argument. But my desires and my personal identity exist right here in the moment, as rude facts, rude enough to ignore reason, and they are the base on which reason rests, after all.]

[These rude facts put a damper on reason's ability to change our values, at least, they protect each of our unique persons, our thickness as personal beings, as well as the objects of immediate experience and consciousness itself. But reason can persuade us to see reality in different ways. Perhaps it can help us to see things we never saw before, which become new parts of our experience, just as undeniable as the cool water flowing in us after we have drunk it. Reason can show us the truth, sometimes, but there are limits to reason, and ultimately personal beings experiencing is reality.]

Labels: #Long Reflection, #metaethics, #morality, #psychology, #rationality

Reading List Postview: The Long Reflection

%reading-list-postview-long-reflection

Wednesday, September 28, 2022

I read some articles and books about the Long Reflection. I don't have a lot to add to the preview for this reading list (which goes in depth in considering problems with the Long Reflection and ways I think it should, will, or would turn out), other than the notes I have taken on the readings, and also the reviews of the two books I included in the list, *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *Teaching Children to Care*.

I wish I could be more helpful in relating what I got from my readings with the issues from the preview, to be able to write a nice summary here, but I guess this will have to do, for now, or for the foreseeable future.

Labels: #book review, #Long Reflection, #note

Blog Chapter 4 Summary and Bibliography

%blog-chapter-4-summary-and-bibliography

Wednesday, September 28, 2022

Looking at my blog posts, I realized that they naturally came in different periods or phases. The 2019 posts were one, then there were those from 2020 - 2021, and then those from 2021 - 2022. In spring of 2022, I decided to deliberately create a phase, which I called a "blog chapter", this being the fourth one.

I think the previous three were things that arose spontaneously and in response to my own needs, while this fourth one was premeditated and a bit artificial. Somewhat like doing a year of school.

This chapter has been about the "exilic-familial", among other things. I explored themes of nation, culture, family, childhood, and education. These topics connect to a vision that I had before officially starting the blog chapter (or, I was hypomanic and wrote something), about "cultural altruism", a path for those trying to do good through culture or in cultural areas, articulating with art, religion, humanities, politics, and effective altruism and especially its "Long Reflection" idea. When we try to govern the world, we are, and should be, informed by nation, culture, family, childhood, and education.

Two specific cultures were themes, Jewish (especially as I best know it, from the Old Testament), and Indonesian. Jewish culture is a family of holiness, and also has a history of enduring exile. I saw in Judaism (at least in the Old Testament itself) a kind of honesty coming out of having lost, and the idea of not winning and that being a route to peace and holiness. I saw in it families broken and reconciling.

Indonesian culture is (to me) about syncretism and unity-in-diversity, as well as a connection to Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Indonesia is a nation that attempts to pull together diverse groups, and which has a history of mixing religions. (I didn't really explore these themes in depth, but only discussed Indonesia a little.)

The war in Ukraine and the polarization of US politics are in the background.

This chapter, written in about seven months if you include the cultural altruism writings drafted in March and April, surprisingly (to me) is in the

same order of magnitude of number of words as the three preceding chapters combined, about 20% less. I keep feeling like I do the math wrong when I count (maybe somehow I do), but I think it's right. I didn't feel like I was working any harder when I wrote. Perhaps I was under the influence of hypomania? I clearly had it in late March, but maybe it continued in a non-obvious, attenuated form throughout the seven months.

I've felt different ways over the last few weeks. Sometimes depleted, sometimes not. I've thought about quitting or drastically cutting back on writing, and also going on full bore. I think what has been particularly hard has been working to finish this after I had already moved on from being into this blog chapter. I could use much of myself as usual to work, but not all of me.

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These are the books reviewed in this blog chapter. Links are to my reviews:

Holy Resilience, by David M. Carr, hardback (1st ed.?) ISBN 978-0-300-20456-8

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, by Robert Louis Stevenson, Bantam Classic paperback, ISBN 0-553-21277-X

In the Shadow of the Banyan, by Vaddey Ratner, 1st hardback ed., ISBN 978-1-4516-5770-8

Between Man and Man, by Martin Buber, tr. Ronald Gregor Smith, Macmillan Paperbacks Edition, 1965, no ISBN

Creative Destruction, by Tyler Cowen, paperback, ISBN 0-691-11783-7

The Meaning of Marriage, by Timothy Keller (with Kathy Keller), hardback (1st ed.?), ISBN 978-0-525-95247-3

Along the Way, ed. Ron Bruner and Dana Kennamer Pemberton, paperback (1st ed.?), ISBN 978-0-891-12460-3

On the Genealogy of Morality, by Friedrich Nietzsche, tr. Carol Diethe, Cambridge edition, paperback (Revised Student ed.), ISBN 978-0-521-69163-5

Teaching Children to Care, by Ruth Sidney Charney, paperback (1st ed.?), ISBN 0-9618636-1-7

Labels: #book review, #childhood, #culture, #education, #family, #Indonesia, #Judaism, #Long Reflection, #mental health, #news and meta, #politics, #romance, #work

Everything is Conscious Experience?

%everything-is-conscious-experience

Monday, October 17, 2022

Epistemic status: I could delay posting this to try to perfect it more, but I guess I'm going to err on the side of posting it, then later on fixing it when I become aware of problems.

I don't think I've ever explained directly why I should think that everything is conscious experience.

Some people look for proof, and other people don't listen to that category, or are somewhere in-between. I will attempt a proof, and then discuss things from the perspective of epistemic uncertainty.

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Certainty?

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Argument

1. What conscious experience is, is conscious experience. That is what it is in itself, and it is nothing else, and can't be anything else. If conscious experience experienced something unconsciously, it would not be conscious, and would not be conscious experience.

2. Conscious experience is that which is consciously experienced, and thus is the only thing which can be consciously experienced.

3. We have experience of conscious experience and thus know that it exists. The question is whether non-conscious beings exist.

4. We can posit non-conscious beings. According to the argument being developed here, we don't presuppose anything about them other than that they are beings and that they are not conscious experience. What they are in a more positive sense would depend on which non-conscious beings we were talking about. But this argument needs to take into account non-conscious beings in general.

5. What non-conscious being is in itself is not conscious experience. So conscious experience can't experience it.

6. For conscious experience to change or be causally affected is for there to be a change in what it experiences based on itself or some other being.

7. If conscious experience can't experience non-conscious being, it can't be changed or causally affected by it.

8. Conscious experience can't experience non-conscious being, so it can't change or causally affect it.

9. The world we live in, the world which can affect us in any way, is completely made up of conscious experience.

--

25 September 2023:

I think in the Argument above, #6 was not clearly put. What I should have said was something like "For a conscious experience to change or be causally affected is for there to be a change in what it experiences based on itself or some other being. That experience that changes has to connect with the being that changes it, has to experience it."

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Objection: Consciousness Monism might not work

(Pluralism: conscious experience and non-conscious being exists. Consciousness monism: only conscious experience exists. By "exist", perhaps I could really mean "exists in such a way that it can affect us".)

What if a world consisting entirely of conscious beings is incoherent? Maybe the world isn't reason-apt in this area, and neither pluralism nor consciousness monism work? Then, we are left to making decisions in uncertainty, or based on other considerations.

What are some problems with consciousness monism?

Here's one: How can there be multiple conscious beings? I am conscious of my own experience, and nothing else. How is it that I am not conscious of, say, God's experience? My experience body has boundaries. Speaking metaphorically, how does my experience "know" which boundaries it belongs to? Does it belong to God's boundaries, or to mine? Do the boundaries exist apart from the contents? (Then, maybe, "boundaries" = Berkeley's "minds", and "contents" = Berkeley's "ideas"?) I have thought that experiences themselves have causal power ("wills"). So which "boundaries" produce the will that arises from an experience?

Two responses:
a) "Somehow or other" God's experiences contain within their boundaries multiple sub-experiences (God's experience is of multiple boundaried experiences). I find myself able to conceive of this, mostly. Still, I'm

somewhat unsatisfied.
b) These problems attend thoughts of any beings that overlap with or are contained by any others, including any non-conscious beings that are not in their own "solipsisms". So maybe the problem is in thinking that when two beings relate, the metaphor is overlap or containment, and not something like contact?

What would it mean for two conscious experiences to contact each other? Let's say there is Experience A and Experience B. What Experience A is, in itself, is Experience A, and what Experience B is, in itself, is Experience B. Since they touch, they participate in the edges of each other. But an experience body is a unitary thing (at least, so it seems in my experience -- and maybe by definition it is, if an experience body is a unit of experience). So they participate in the whole of each other while remaining separate. This is possible if they become identical copies of each other. They remain separate beings, so that consciousness monism is only a monism of substance, and does not mean that there is only one being. Experience A could contact only a part of Experience B, which could have many other experience bodies, some of these other experience bodies mirroring other beings' experience bodies besides Experience A. So there could be more to Experience B than just its mirroring of Experience A. If "Experience A" is "a creature's experience body" and "Experience B" is "God's experience bodies", then the creature contacts part of God's experience.

(This explanation is new to me and is different from the overlap/containment explanation I've favored in the past. Without investigating, my first thought is that this could cause problems with various things I've relied on in the past, such as "the set of all things" existing, and maybe others.)

Now, by allowing for contact (rather than overlap or containment), have I opened up a way for non-conscious being to interact with conscious experience, by a non-conscious being contacting rather than overlapping/containing/being-contained-by a conscious experience? No, because of #5 in the argument above ("What non-conscious being is in itself is not conscious experience. So conscious experience can't experience it."). Conscious experience can't experience even the edge of non-conscious being, because non-conscious being's edge is not conscious experience.

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Objection: Becoming Conscious (Matrices vs. Metaphysical Darkness)

Can non-conscious being become conscious experience? If so, then maybe it could turn into conscious experience, affect another experience body,

stop affecting it, turn back into non-conscious being.

This doesn't work because the past has to be able to cause the present. If the past is not made of conscious experience, it can't cause a present of conscious experience.

Or, if that argument proves unsound or controversial, then here is another:

If non-conscious being became conscious, it could no longer be affected by any non-conscious beings. So it would be cut off from them. But, until it became a conscious experience, it could not contact (or overlap, or contain) any conscious experience. It would be separated by "metaphysical darkness" from conscious experience. There is no way to cross metaphysical darkness, no way to relate through it or conceive of anything on the other side of it. It's a state of total disconnection, which inherently rules out any interaction. There's either darkness, contact, overlap, or containment, and only the last three allow beings to interact.

Two beings that are not contacting, overlapping, or containing each other can come to interact if they are both connected by a matrix (or set of matrices that form one big matrix). For example, in the world of conscious experience, space is a matrix that contain physical objects and allow them to find each other. Matrices contact, overlap, or contain each of the beings that they interrelate.

Non-conscious beings can't contact, overlap, or be contained by matrices made of conscious experience. So they are separate from conscious experience and if they changed into conscious beings at best could become isolated experience bodies (they still wouldn't affect the universe of conscious experience that we inhabit).

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Objection: Consciousness Monism denies our natural intuitions that material things exist

I don't find it difficult to believe that matter exists, as a consciousness monist. In fact, I think there is something material about all experience, even noetic experience. There is a solidity and reality to all experience, as though it is made out of some substance.

From another angle, I like Berkeley's idea of the "perceptual object". The rock that I see is made up of perceptions of it. Its solidity is made up of experience. The rock is real, hurts the foot, breaks the leg, etc. While my personal experience of the rock and what it means are idiosyncratic, they are not divorced from a kind of objective reality of that exact particular rock. The only thing is that all of that reality mentioned in this paragraph is experienced.

Our natural intuitions are not always correct. Or, from another angle, they are always correct in a sense, but when we think about things scientifically, we can add new natural intuitions that follow from rational argument. (This is how we believe that rocks are made up of tiny, invisible objects called molecules.)

The idea with this post is to present a scientific/rational kind of eye-opening, so that new natural intuitions can be observed in our "noetic environment". Like pointing out an object on a table which your eye technically took in already, but which you never noticed, but now you do.

I don't think consciousness monism is a serious offender against natural intuitions and can be as natural to believe as something like the theory that things are made out of things we can't see.

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Probabilities/Credences

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Here is another perspective, for those more attuned to a worldview of epistemic uncertainty.

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Credences

1. We know that conscious experience exists. The question is whether non-conscious being exists. Let's say, naively, that since the existence of non-conscious being is intuitively plausible, but we have no evidence or argument (at this point), to lead us more specifically, that we say that there is a 0.5 probability that non-conscious being exists. ("It either exists or it doesn't, even chance it does or doesn't, 50-50 chance.") (So $P(nCB)_1 = 0.5$).

2. The numbered "Argument" I gave above, including my responses to the "Objections", is plausible and has some evidential weight, we'll say. Maybe it sounds good, but we have somewhat lost the ability to commit to beliefs because we think that there might be some counterargument we haven't heard yet. Let's say we aren't convinced of it, but it also could be true. This substitutes for coming to a conclusion of "proved"/"disproved". The naive value here to assign to how the "Argument" affects credence will again be 0.5. (So $P(nCB)_2 = 0.5$).

3. Should $P(nCB)_2$ be combined in some way with $P(nCB)_1$ to produce $P(nCB)_{1 \text{ and } 2}$ (probability of non-conscious beings given both step 1 and 2 in this section)? There's probably a neat answer to this that I don't know. I'm not really sure what to say. Part of me wants to say that a) the new

evidence provided by the 0.5 credence "Argument" should cause me to update in some direction, maybe weakly toward $P(nCB)_{1 \text{ and } 2} = 0$ (like to a credence of 0.45). Another part of me feels vaguely like b) it doesn't work that way, like 2 supersedes 1. I rejected the earlier thought c) that 1 and 2 "stack" so that $P(nCB)_{1 \text{ and } 2} = (0.5 * 0.5) = 0.25$. Maybe a) is a compromise between b) and c).

N. Add any other arguments for or against non-conscious beings.

The exact numbers used here for these credences should be updated by the interested reader to reflect their own beliefs, and, unfortunately, I haven't produced a finished formula, but this provides a sort of template for calculating credences, and maybe a weak first anchoring value of P(nCB) (such that there is a 50%, or somewhat less than 50%, chance that there are non-conscious beings).

Labels: #George Berkeley, #immaterialism, #metaphysics, #philosophy, #rationality

News: 26 October 2022

%news-26-october-2022

Wednesday, October 26, 2022

For a few years I've felt like I was supposed to take a break from doing philosophy, but there hasn't seemed to have been a good time to do that. But now I think I will take that break. So unless there's something really important to address, I won't do philosophy for a while.

That accounts for a lot of what this blog is about, so maybe I won't post as often. But I will try to come up with other things to post. I still write on Twitter.

To keep my mind busy, I'm focusing more on learning Indonesian than I have so far. Also working on some music.

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Update: I added a section on "domestic missions" to Things to Do.

Labels: #news and meta

News: 29 November 2022

%news-29-november-2022

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

I decided to quit Twitter, but thought that deleting my Twitter would be too drastic. So I'm resolving not to check it. (I've done this before and we'll see how long I go this time.)

I started a project to help me keep in touch with the intellectual / artistic / cultural worlds where new things are happening and conversations are being had. This being a directory of intellectual / artistic / cultural sources.

I've been trying to find something to do for this blog, and I think what I will do next is movie reviews. I've done a couple so far, and it seems to be a productive format.

I think it's time to re-start my Bible commentary project (which will probably take between 5 and 15 years to finish). I started it last year, but maybe I wasn't ready.

Labels: #news and meta

"Aletheism" and "Omnism" as alternatives to "Altruism"

%aletheism-and-omnism-as-alternatives-to

Friday, December 9, 2022

This is something I first posted to the Effective Altruism Forum.

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(I wrote this before the FTX scandal, so it was not intended as part of the following discourse.)

I don't think it makes sense to replace the word "altruism" in the name of the "effective altruism" movement, but I can think of a couple of reframings of "what it is people who call themselves 'altruists' tend to be and be pursuing" which might be interesting or even useful to think about. These reframings can be discussed through the thought experiment of "what other words could be used besides 'altruism'?".

Omnism

"Altruism" could be seen as "an ethical orientation toward beings other than yourself". (Caring about other beings, acting for the sake of other beings, etc.) If we want an alternative to "altruism" but still want our ethical orientation to end up including beings other than ourselves, we can use the term "omnism", for "an ethical orientation toward all, or the whole of, morally significant beings". ("Omnism" from "omni", meaning "all".)

One potentially useful difference between "omnism" and "altruism" is that if you care about all morally significant beings, you care about yourself, because you are a morally significant being. This is something an "other-oriented" altruist might miss.

Another potentially useful difference is that omnists might remember more often to think not of specific small-scale interventions with certain "others", but also of collectives, systems, or the overall collective or system (the whole). I can see why a small-scale mindset is practically useful, but it could be good to bias yourself against that to some extent.

If I adopt the identity of omnism instead of altruism, I feel balanced and interrelated, plus some hard-to-express feeling from how the word "holism" or "holistic" is loaded in our culture or in my personal cultural experience.

Aletheism

Altruism and omnism are both about an orientation toward well-being, and potentially "engineering reality" to produce well-being. (Maybe that could be called "welfarism"? (Maybe not the best term).)

"Aletheism", by contrast, could be seen as "an ethical orientation toward the truth, knowing it and speaking it". ("Aletheism" from "aletheia", meaning "truth"[1].) But, this can include the goals of altruism/omnism if we understand that to really understand moral truths, we must act. For instance, if you really understand that something should not be, you must act against it if you can. That which should not be inherently calls out to be changed into that which should be.

One potentially useful difference between "aletheism" and what I guess could be called "welfarism" is that aletheists are biased against manipulation, misrepresentation, self-delusion and premature epistemic optimization.

When I try on the "aletheist" identity instead of the "altruist", I feel a clarity, honesty, and lack of controllingness, as well as perhaps some hard-to-express feeling from how the word "truth" is loaded in our culture, or in my personal cultural experience. As an aletheist, I follow reality without an agenda, and because moral truth is part of reality, I try to do the right thing. (That may make aletheism sound like a clear winner over "welfarism", but maybe "welfarism" is more "muscular", competitive, and effective, at least in the short-term. My preference/bias is with aletheism, for what it's worth.)

[1] I chose this term ["aletheism"] not with ancient Greek or Heideggerian resonances in mind, but because it's the modern Greek for "truth" according to https://translate.google.com/?
sl=en&tl=el&text=truth&op=translate

Labels: #altruism, #holism, #morality, #philosophy, #psychology, #truth

You Don't Have to Profit if You Don't Want To

%you-dont-have-to-profit-if-you-dont

Wednesday, December 14, 2022

Let's say you have a single-family house with extra space on your lot. You could build another little house on your property and rent to some tenants. In San Diego, people are doing this. The market rate for an apartment is high. You could make money this way.

But what if you don't want to make money? You don't have to make money if you don't want to. At least, you don't have to make money over what it takes to make it sustainable for you to provide this housing.

If you want this housing to pay for itself, it should provide for its own construction costs. It could take you a decade to pay off the construction costs, renting at market rate. But after that, it's like if you've paid off your mortgage on your house. You just have to pay property tax, maintenance, and utilities.

Dealing with tenants is sometimes stressful, and maybe you have to price that in for it to be sustainable for you to provide this housing.

And there might be other factors to consider that I'm not aware of, and I guess in some cases they may force you to rent at market price, or not rent at all.

But once you take care of all the factors you have to, in order to sustainably rent your property, you can charge as little additional as you want. So you don't have to profit if you don't want to. You can just pay yourself for your costs and your work.

Labels: #economics, #life choices, #morality, #San Diego

2022 to 2023

%2022-to-2023

Sunday, January 1, 2023

Review of 2022:

In the first few months of 2022, I wrote some posts related to the Bible commentary project I have wanted to work on (which I did work on toward the end of 2021). Starting in March and April, I moved toward the main work of the year, which was a set of book reviews, and other posts, related to culture, family, nationhood, politics, the "exilic-familial", etc. I finished all that at the end of September. Then, I didn't do much writing for the rest of the year. I was trying to figure out what to do next. I did restart, but then stopped again, the Bible commentary project. I also wrote some movie reviews, but stopped doing that.

I found myself somewhat losing interest in effective altruism. Maybe wanting to get some distance after 10 years under the influence of it, and about 2.5 years of more intensive study of it. Also the big publicity push for *What We Owe the Future* made me feel like EA's real work was coming to a close (being deeply in touch with reality however it could turn out to be) and it was headed toward cashing in its chips. I don't think EA will miss my occasional posts on the EA Forum, so I don't feel committed to them. I never felt like I really belonged (or really didn't belong) to the EA movement, but it seems like I could turn my attention elsewhere since there isn't definitely a place for me in it. Perhaps in the future things will change and it might make sense for me to pay attention to them more.

I moved toward and away from Twitter during 2022, and got very close to deleting my account, but I want to leave up my old tweets, especially those related to Establishedness and Loving God.

Comparison of expectations with reality

I predicted that I would keep working on the cross book, MSLN book, and Bible commentary, and I did not do so very much. I predicted that I would not write blog posts, but that I did.

I predicted that I wouldn't interact with the Christian humanists much, and that proved true. I mentioned making contact with EACH (Effective Altruism for Christians) and said that I might interact with them in 2022, but I mostly didn't.

I had a mixed record in the quality of my predictions. These predictions don't matter too much, practically speaking, but it is interesting to ask why

I was correct and incorrect in the way I was.

Possibly I was able to predict my (non-)experience with the Christian humanists because a) I had no real connection with any person in the scene and b) I did not really love the scene. If you decide to ignore something, and you succeed, then you forget about it unless something outside you (your desires, memories, mental ties; or someone else drawing you in) brings it back to your attention. If I were asked about a) and b), could I have understood at the time last year that those obtained, or could that only be seen in hindsight? I'm not sure, but I think it's possible I would have seen those things if I had thought to ask.

In that case, maybe in the future, if I am evaluating some social element of my life, I can predict that if a) I am not really into it deeply and b) I have no real social tie with anyone in it, I will probably not think about it and won't get back into it if I choose to ignore it. However, it's always possible that like in the case of the Christian humanists, maybe I would have gotten really interested in, let's say, the topic of Christianity and politics, and then found my way back to the scene -- so I could still find my way back even if a) and b) hold. But I guess if they do hold, then it's possible I will forget about the social element in question, and by default I will avoid it for some time just because of my decision to ignore it. But if they don't hold, then I probably shouldn't assume I'll stay away.

Maybe this is a useful thought to come out of studying past predictions? Maybe somewhat interesting.

I failed in predicting about what kind of writing I would do (book vs. blog). I think I was anchoring too much to how I felt at the time and what I was working on at the time. Should I learn from this not to do that? I think then I might not trust my instincts as much. I might stop sensing my intuitions in the first place, since I would know that they weren't that reliable in the long run.

A connection to the intuitive side of me is valuable, and I think worth protecting at some cost. So maybe as a trade-off, I will be somewhat bad at predicting my future, so that I can live in my current moment fully. I think I'm more likely to get social pressure toward representing myself and my future correctly. But I sometimes think that our society is too wise and does not care enough, and doesn't see with its own two eyes. It corrects itself toward accurate predictions rather than toward caring about what really matters. (Maybe there is a way to correct society toward caring?)

Why should I engage in predictions about my life? Maybe to get better at predicting, or update my model of the world? I think the impulse for me is more (in this moment) to have something to say about the future. Not to control it, as a plan or promise might, but just to relate to it. I guess I could list my hopes for the coming year instead of, or in addition to, my

predictions. But hopes are heavy and loaded things. A prediction, especially one which is decorative rather than functional, is a lighter thing, simply a way to say words, have a somewhat casual relationship with the future.

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In terms of what was retrospectively surprising, the most notable thing to me was my new interest in Indonesia. I had no idea that I would become interested in it at the beginning of the year, and it has been a fairly significant interest.

Preview of 2023

In 2023, I can think of a few possible things to work on.

Songwriting: I wrote a lot of songs, some with words, over the past 2.5 years, as a side project or hobby, and am close to recording a demo of an album (or it may well be the final version). I have a lot more material I could finish writing and recording, and I think it likely enough that I will continue to have new ideas.

Similarly with poetry.

I will probably write some blog posts, occasionally.

I hope to release an old book I've alluded to here on the blog.

Labels: #altruism, #news and meta, #rationality

Waiting for Margot: Introduction, Ep. 1 "Pilot"

%waiting-for-margot-introduction-ep-1

Friday, February 3, 2023

In 2019, I wrote a kind of sitcom script called *Waiting for Margot*. It has taken me all this time to edit it and decide to release it. At first it was ahead of its time in my life, but now it's somewhat a thing of the past, something to look back at.

It touches on many of the issues of this blog and in this year in which I don't have many blog posts to offer, this can be somewhat like a continuation of this blog.

The series overall (in script form) can be followed at 10v24.net/margot.

The first episode, released today, is "Pilot", the pilot episode.

Synopsis:

You (Beth) meet someone named Julia whom you may or may not already know, at your favorite cafe, Mitzi's. Your friend Brian appears and reveals that he is waiting for Margot.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 2 "Jackson"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-2-jackson

Friday, February 10, 2023

Here is the second episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Jackson".

Synopsis:

Julia is on a first date with Jackson. Meaning and human happiness react -- chemistry. A different element cuts in.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 3 "Robert"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-3-robert

Sunday, February 12, 2023

Here is the third episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Robert".

Synopsis:

You (Beth) spend the day with Robert, your ex, running away from Death the Inevitable at Anderson Reservoir.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 4 "Brian"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-4-brian

Wednesday, February 15, 2023

Here is the fourth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Brian".

Synopsis:

A regular rainy day at the cafe, until something happens on earth...

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 5 "Angela"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-5-angela

Thursday, February 16, 2023

Here is the fifth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Angela".

Synopsis:

You go to ride a bus to nowhere, and happen to meet someone on her own journey...

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 6 "Camping"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-6-camping

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

Here is the sixth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Camping".

Synopsis:

You go to ride a bus to nowhere, and happen to meet someone on her own journey...

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 8 "Shopping"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-8-shopping

Friday, March 17, 2023

Here is the eighth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Shopping".

Synopsis:

The three of you deal with apathy and then you and Julia go shopping at a thrift store.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 9 "Selling"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-9-selling

Saturday, March 18, 2023

Here is the ninth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Selling".

Synopsis:

A chance encounter with an ex-philosopher drives you and Brian to consider the meaning of "realistic".

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 7 "Returning"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-7-returning

Sunday, March 19, 2023

Here is the seventh episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Returning".

Synopsis:

The three of you return from camping in the camp shuttle, talking to strangers as you go.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 10 "Monopoly"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-10-monopoly

Wednesday, March 29, 2023

Here is the tenth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Monopoly".

Synopsis:

A board game draws out a board game-loving stranger, from the land of church.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 11 "Chutes and Ladders"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-11-chutes-and

Tuesday, April 4, 2023

Here is the eleventh episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Chutes and Ladders".

Synopsis:

A weird day leads to the playing of a board game, and a discussion among friends.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 12 "Patience"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-12-patience

Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Here is the twelfth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Patience".

Synopsis:

Discussions of patience and the playing of a card game named, or misnamed, "patience".

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 13 "Breaking the Devil's Backbone"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-13-breaking

Monday, April 10, 2023

Here is the thirteenth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Breaking the Devil's Backbone".

Synopsis:

A board game summons a woman from Nashville, who dreams of making a cafe to invite in a "consuming fire".

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 14 "Alte Stadt"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-14-alte-stadt

Tuesday, April 11, 2023

Here is the fourteenth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Alte Stadt".

Synopsis:

You (Beth) go with Brian and Julia to Alte Stadt, the site of the original Hoheres Wesen.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 15 "catholic tastes"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-15-catholic-tastes

Thursday, April 13, 2023

Here is the fifteenth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "catholic tastes".

Synopsis:

You all meet Brian's friends at an establishment in a faraway part of Hoheres Wesen, and experience... transformation?

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 16 "Inner Conflict"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-16-inner-conflict

Tuesday, April 25, 2023

Here is the sixteenth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Inner Conflict".

Synopsis:

You (Beth) are trying to decide whether to volunteer as a writing tutor for Angela's non-profit.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 17 "Jitters"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-17-jitters

Tuesday, May 2, 2023

Here is the seventeenth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Jitters".

Synopsis:

Jitters, nervousness, and weird thoughts afflict the three friends, until someone from Julia's past and present arrives...

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 18 "Complaint"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-18-complaint

Sunday, May 7, 2023

Here is the eighteenth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Complaint".

Synopsis:

You (Beth) meet a random young stranger at Mitzi's and impart wisdom.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 19 "Giving Up"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-19-giving-up

Monday, May 15, 2023

Here is the nineteenth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Giving Up".

Synopsis:

Brian feels like giving up on his writing project but you (Beth) push back.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 20 "Giving Up, Part 2"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-20-giving-up-part

Wednesday, May 17, 2023

Here is the twentieth episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Giving Up, Part 2".

Synopsis:

You (Beth) invite your friends to your apartment to eat dinner.

Labels: #news and meta

Waiting for Margot: Ep. 21 "Farewell"

%waiting-for-margot-ep-21-farewell

Thursday, May 18, 2023

Here is the twenty-first episode of *Waiting for Margot*, "Farewell".

Synopsis:

A farewell occurs, and then a goodbye.

Labels: #news and meta

The Future of Simple Life

%the-future-of-simple-life

Sunday, May 21, 2023

In episode 15 of *Waiting for Margot*, there is some discussion of a restaurant in Hoheres Wesen called Simple Life:

> YOU: Have you heard of Simple Life?
>
> BRIAN: What's that?
>
> YOU: It's a fast food chain.
>
> BRIAN: I don't normally go to fast food places.
>
> YOU: Their slogan is "Faster than fast food, and healthier, too."
>
> BRIAN: How do they manage that?
>
> YOU: They're mainly a rice and beans place. They constantly make rice and beans and just put them in containers when people drive up.
>
> BRIAN: It's a drive through?
>
> YOU: Yeah. And they have a small sit-down space. They also make greens and other vegetables.
>
> BRIAN: No meat?
>
> YOU: No.
>
> BRIAN: How much do they cost?
>
> YOU: Same price as fast food but bigger portions.
>
> BRIAN: Do they have sauces?

YOU: Yeah, they make salsas and sauces.

BRIAN: And they make money?

YOU: They've been expanding.

BRIAN: Huh, I'll have to check that out.

YOU: Definitely.

BRIAN: It sounds filling.

YOU: Yeah.

BRIAN: Is the sit-down space like a fast food place?

YOU: Yeah, not very inviting.

BRIAN: You've been to one?

YOU: I went once, yeah.

BRIAN: How was the food?

YOU: I got black beans and brown rice. And, some kind of greens, probably collard.

BRIAN: How was it?

YOU: It was just like if you make black beans and rice at home, with collard greens. It's not like restaurant food at all.

BRIAN: Wow.

YOU: Yeah, it was pretty plain so I put some salsa on it and then it was good. Also vinegar on the collard greens.

BRIAN: We should go there sometime.

YOU: They don't have any locations near our part of town.

JULIA: Maybe we'll remember if we're ever out where they are.

BRIAN: A chain like that probably has a story behind it.

YOU: Yeah, probably. I don't know what the story is, though.

I think I might have had a story in mind when I wrote that episode, in 2019, but I don't remember it anymore.

Here are some recent thoughts on Simple Life, which can be seen as a kind of postscript for *Waiting for Margot*:

Here is a possible future for the world of *Waiting for Margot*:

When Beth, Brian, and Julia had that conversation, Simple Life was a small chain of restaurants, but expanding. Over time, Simple Life adopted a policy whereby patrons could tip. This tip would go to the Simple Life Endowment, invested in various funds. Returns on the endowment would go to lower the price of the meals, to make them more affordable, and also to pay the workers higher wages. Patrons who bought 12 or more meals at Simple Life locations in one year would be members entitled to a vote in how the endowment funds were spent. (All employees would get one free meal a month at Simple Life, which could count toward the membership requirements if they chose to eat them.) The endowment funds were once spent to buy an avocado orchard in the region between Hoheres Wesen and Sunset City, the fruits of which were sold for below market price to customers. Another use of endowment funds was to buy a produce farm in the area, the fruits of which were given away to customers when they were in season.

Simple Life cultivated a clientele of working class people and also well-to-do white collar and creative class workers, who built its endowment to quite a size. Using this endowment, Simple Life was able to compete with fast food chains on price while improving quality, and then outcompete them.

The other fast food chains tried different strategies to stay in business. Some of them tried to get money from venture capitalists. For a time, the VC-funded fast food companies could outcompete Simple Life on price. Fast food was so

cheap, people didn't feel compelled to eat it as much once they bought it. For instance, CSU Hoheres Wesen fraternity brothers bought mountains of Wendy's and McDonald's hamburgers and staged an invasion of each other's fraternity houses using the hamburgers as ammunition. There were concerns about food waste, and regulators began to be interested in the situation.

But then the VCs got tired of losing money, while the donors to Simple Life did not. So in the end VCs came to believe that investing in fast food to save it from Simple Life wasn't a good idea. Then, the fast food industry started to adopt Simple Life's financial structure, trying to court money from customers to build their own endowments. Sometimes billionaires contributed. CEOs of fast food companies sometimes donated heavily to their own companies' endowments, out of their compensation.

This settled into a more or less stable equilibrium, and then other industries started to use the donor-endowment model. Over time, people started to wonder if this was going to be the end of "capitalism as we know it". Increasingly, businesses were not accountable only to shareholders who were trying to gain a profit, but also to altruistic customers (and outside donors), who were not. People give money away for altruistic reasons, and so, often were interested in their money doing altruistic things within the businesses they helped endow.

Businesses benefited from having endowments during downturns. Businesses that were on the margins of success and failure during downturns could use their endowments to survive. This had several benefits: Entrepreneurs didn't as often have to go bankrupt and "ride the rollercoaster" of working up the courage, capital, and hard thinking to try to succeed in business -- fail -- and then try again. Employees more often had stable employment. Customers more often didn't have their lives disrupted by the businesses they bought from going out of business. Because businesses didn't fail as often, more-mediocre ones survived, but then had the chance to grow toward excellence.

Simple Life's endowment was explicitly for the use of the benefit of its stakeholders (customers and employees), and

because those stakeholders had a voice, in theory they could use the money however they wanted and it would at least benefit them from a preference satisfaction perspective. But, it became necessary to set up constitutions for the use of the endowments. And, as one would expect from any large deliberative bodies, the endowment member's meetings were prone to the forces of politics. When the politics got particularly dysfunctional, donors would get fed up and transfer their membership to a competitor.

There were cases of fraud and abuse of the donor-endowment system. There was concern that billionaires could use the system as a proxy for owning businesses, or for whitewashing their money and their legacies. As with previous iterations of capitalism, the donor-endowment system led to regulation. Overall, while the effects of donor-endowment capitalism were noticeable (lower prices, higher wages, higher quality, buffering against economic downturns), it wasn't a revolutionary change after all. The main thing that was different about it was that there was a new altruistic voice at the table deciding how firms operated.

In countries with dysfunctional governments, donor-endowment businesses increasingly took on the role of parallel governments.

Labels: #altruism, #business, #economics, #politics

Album Release: Reality

%album-release-reality

Thursday, May 25, 2023

I wrote an album of songs in 2020 and 2021 and recorded it earlier this year. Now I am releasing it. It could be seen as a summary of all of my writing so far. It's called *Reality*.

Labels: #news and meta

News: 1 June 2023

%news-1-june-2023

Thursday, June 1, 2023

I recently finished releasing *Waiting for Margot* and *Reality*, as you may know.

I am now offering the older books I've written for sale as print books for $15 each. I like print books and sometimes pay $15 (or more) for new books, so I feel like someone else might feel the same for mine. My books sell better than I expected at the brick-and-mortar store (Verbatim) in San Diego where I sell them. I hope to have a print version of *Waiting for Margot* available soon.

Today I released some "wordless prayers" on YouTube and archive.org. (MIDI instrumentals.) Like *Reality*, I see them as expressing ideas and feelings that follow from my writing.

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I deleted my Twitter account finally. (I mostly stopped posting in November.)

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I've cleared out all the unreleased material I had intended to release. Now what? One possibility is to work on music. I am ambivalent about music. Writing is something I clearly want to do, but music feels strange to me. I can see how music has its advantages, and I have some talent at music (but with skill deficits). It's certainly a useful side project, to fill in the "right-brained" side of what I'm trying to say. But I don't completely want to do it.

Another possibility is to continue the background work for engaging with non-Christian religions (read about other religions, learn Indonesian). It can seem like I'm impossibly far from being competent in those areas (but I am not expecting to be anytime soon).

A third possibility is to start reviewing this blog (look at every post and make comments and/or corrections). I had been putting this off because I thought it would get me into doing philosophy, which I have decided to avoid until October 2024. I think I can go ahead with it if I simply note when I have a question about my philosophy or see how it should be better, and then not resolve that until later.

One thing I'm more sure I will do with this blog is make posts of links to

things that are too long for my subreddit.

Labels: #news and meta

Long Links #1

%long-links-1

Tuesday, June 13, 2023

On my subreddit I put up links to individual videos, websites, or blog posts, etc. Any of these things can be "consumed" (paid attention to) in one sitting (generally speaking). Those are "short links". But "long links" take more than one sitting and to me seem to not belong in the same context as short links.

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I read *Agnes Grey* by Anne Brontë. It's a depiction of being a governess. The protagonist finds herself with higher moral standards than the people around her, unable to voice her real views. She is alone in the household of her employer, is an alien who has only distant connection to the people who have the same tastes as her.

I think this book could be helpful to people who find themselves stumbling on new moral truths, but unable to be with the people who also believe in those truths. Or for anyone who is in the situation of being a missionary, whether sent officially or not.

--

I watched some videos from Andy Edwards' YouTube channel. He is a drummer, teacher, and prog and jazz fan who does music criticism and music history. I watched his videos on what's wrong with jazz and on "the English aesthetic", among others.

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Another book I read: *A Border Passage* by Leila Ahmed is a memoir of her young life in Egypt around the middle of the 20th century and her transition to Western academia.

It has interesting discussion of "men's Islam" vs. "women's Islam". "Men's" being text-based, scholarship-based, while "women's" being formed by the recited Quran (the emphasis of the text as remembered from hearing it recited) and by moral life. ("Women's" is more or less the perspective of the non-elite, according to Ahmed.)

Like *Agnes Grey*, the book has discussion of people isolated in foreign cultures (a European nanny in Ahmed's childhood household in Cairo, Ahmed when she was in graduate school at Cambridge).

Additionally, discussion of race, nationalism, the constructed identity of

"Arabness", imperialism. Also reminiscences of Muslim female spaces and Ahmed's feminism.

Labels: #colonialism, #feminism, #Islam, #literature, #music

News: 25 June 2023

%news-25-june-2023

Sunday, June 25, 2023

I made a print version of *Waiting for Margot*.

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Thinking about things I could do with the blog, I decided one thing would be to write posts that make sense of MSLN or anything else important on the blog. This might help me to know how to explain my writing to other people.

Labels: #news and meta

Secular Life, Millennial Life, Heavenly Life

%secular-life-millennial-life-heavenly

Friday, June 30, 2023

I have found myself saying "this life", to refer to the life that each of us lives between physical birth and death. What follows "this life" is to wait for resurrection. Then, to be resurrected in the Resurrection which can also be called the Millennium. I like being able to say "millennial" about what goes on in the Millennium. But "this-lifely" is awkward.

Another term for "this life" could be "secular life", the time that is lived in this world. An atheist, Muslim, Christian, and even a Buddhist or Hindu would agree that there is a thing that we live in on some level, agree on that same thing, in which people are born (and registered as having been born if they live in a time and place where birth certificates are kept), and we can all interact politically and modern medicine staves off problems that we all recognize as problems. In this world, where perhaps we only expect to live 60 or 80 years, time flows linearly.

The Millennium, I assume, and this would be the natural assumption from natural theology, I think, flows linearly as well. Some people talk about non-linear time (*kairos*), versus linear time (*chronos*). Maybe *kairos* runs parallel to both secular and Millennial time, which are forms of *chronos*.

(My understanding of *kairos* in this post is that it is "gathered time" (every Christmas is linked to every Christmas you ever experienced). If the past currently exists, we can be close to all the Christmases at once at each Christmastime (*kairos*), even if otherwise things proceed according to *chronos* (where we are closest to the moment that just entered the past).)

Hell, ultimately, becomes non-existent and thus I guess timeless. Heaven, according to MSL, if I recall correctly, has a *chronos* component (repeated outworkings of life that proceed linearly), but perhaps also a *kairos* component. Certainly restful time lends itself to contact with *kairos* or the timeless, and heaven is a time of rest.

I don't know what to say about times before creation (the beginning of secular time).

Labels: #definition, #heaven, #time

Conscience; Fiducial Conscience

%conscience-fiducial-conscience

Tuesday, July 4, 2023

I read L. John Van Til's *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea*. I can't say I followed it very closely, but it did introduce me to thinking about conscience.

My idea of conscience is that it is an intuition which in some way is the voice of truth or God, but isn't necessarily infallible. It could be the voice of God because a person has trained themselves to think the way that God does, so they naturally react the way he would. Or, it could be the voice of God because when they see something, God directly causes them to feel that way about it. It could be the voice of truth, because by thinking through and experiencing the way things are, we come to react to things intuitively according to how they really are. Or, it could be the voice of truth because some truths are conveyed intuitively, directly. (Or it could be that God or some other being tells us these truths directly.)

What is interesting about conscience is this ambiguity as to what produces it. Normally when we talk about conscience, we are talking about moral conscience (sometimes also intellectual conscience). Your moral conscience tells you that something is wrong. Should you do it anyway? There's some chance that your conscience is malformed. But it could be well-formed and thus in touch with reality. And it could be the voice of God telling you not to do something. It is never totally safe to ignore your conscience, although it may be fallible.

Another variant of conscience, beside intellectual and moral, which I am making up here, perhaps is new, is "fiducial conscience". We have a sense that certain things are trustworthy or not. It's an intuition, and thus it can't be fully justified in words. It is not necessarily irrational, as I define "rational", but it is not fully legible. It is produced by the same kinds of things as moral conscience. Should you trust your fiducial conscience? Probably, although it may sometimes be wrong.

Some matters may only be resolved by appeals to fiducial conscience. You sense that something is wrong but can't put its wrongness into words -- some people who trust your intuition based on prior experience should trust your intuition, and probably you should just on the basis of it being your own fiducial conscience. But this doesn't scale up as aptly as verbal, textual reasoning and evidence. It is less suitable for governing a nation or

even a congregation of a church, although it is reasonably well-suited for governing an individual or group of close friends and family. (And, perhaps many of the individual votes that are cast in nations or churches depend on people's experiences and leadings from God that inform the "black box" of their conscience.)

The concept of conscience allows us to both trust and not overtrust intuition, and potentially have some idea that we can train it.

What the concept of conscience introduces is that everyone is a witness to the truth, in a way that they are uniquely qualified to be. They can experience intuitions that no one else does or can look into and debunk. However, these intuitions and witnesses are only binding on those who trust them, and by default the only person who (probably) should find them binding is the witness themselves. It is not the case that these intuitions are necessarily reflective of the truth, but they may be and it's hard or perhaps impossible in some cases to completely rule them out.

There is an absolute truth, and we can partially know it, and to some extent each of us is in a unique position to know the truth. I guess this could be a midpoint between "everyone has their own truth and perspective" and "there is one absolute, objective truth".

Labels: #epistemology, #intuition, #morality, #psychology, #trust, #truth

Serious Becomes Rational

%serious-becomes-rational

Tuesday, July 11, 2023

When people get more serious about something, they tend to want to be more rational. They want to consider all the evidence and how it interrelates, looking into whatever concrete particulars are involved, trying to get a good idea of exactly what good and bad could come of that thing, what the consequences of that thing will be in their life, and what consequences their actions might have in the life of that thing.

For instance, two lovers as they go toward marriage, or a parent and a child, or investors with a business.

Labels: #life choices, #rationality

Long Links #2

%long-links-2

Tuesday, July 11, 2023

On my subreddit I put up links to individual videos, websites, or blog posts, etc. Any of these things can be "consumed" (paid attention to) in one sitting (generally speaking). Those are "short links". But "long links" take more than one sitting and to me seem to not belong in the same context as short links.

--

I read Maxine Bédat's *Unraveled*.

Subtitle: "The Life and Death of a Garment" (from farm, to fabric-making, to cut-and-sew, to retailer and consumer, to disposal and secondhand sale). A long time ago I got into fair trade clothing consuming: buying fair trade and thrift store clothes more. I wanted to see if this still made sense, so I took the opportunity to pick up this book from a "little library".

I am pretty sure it makes sense to buy from thrift stores. I had been concerned that I was taking affordable clothes away from people who had less money than me by buying from thrift stores. I remembered that there were situations where bales of clothes were dumped in developing countries' clothes markets which was bad for their attempts to start their own textile industries. Was this still true? It seems like as of 2021 (date of publication), yes. So I can take one garment at a time out of that stream. Maybe I'm taking good clothes away from consumers in developing countries? Possibly.

The book makes it seem like overproduction of clothes is a bad thing. Certainly it's costly environmentally (clothes become trash, resources are consumed to make extra clothes). But (my thought) then there's an abundance of clothes in developing countries.

In terms of fair trade (manufacturing clothing with a fair wage), I think the situation is that some are caught in Molochian races to the bottom (developing countries, factory owners, maybe the brands to some extent), but some people stand outside the struggle to survive and can make unforced errors (the brands, perhaps; certainly their CEOs who could give up some compensation to pay workers more; consumers) or more positively put, can just decide to make things better. Fair trade is a way for consumers to signal that they want things to be better, and make things marginally better. But maybe unions, regulation, are more effective? (One semi-self-regulation described is something called the Accord on Fire and

Building Safety in Bangladesh, mentioned in ch. 4 on p. 111 (hardback first ed.) and following) Maybe if a brand saw the PR gain of selling to consumers who have already signalled their desire to pay for clothes that are made with better wages (maybe signalled through fair trade purchases), they would pay workers more / push for better working conditions so as to make the other brands look bad by comparison? *** *** (An) EA perspective: take care of extreme poverty so that no one will work at bad factories and thus they have pressure to get better. On the other hand, pricing in fair wages into clothes could get people to "donate" there who wouldn't think to donate to extreme poverty charities. I feel like the comparison of all these ideas is beyond me, but I would be interested in seeing a collaboration (an adversarial collaboration?) between Bédat and an EA to see what they would come up with. I feel like Bédat is a non-EA who might interface OK with EAs (does research, acknowledges complexities). She has her own think tank ("think and do tank"), New Standard Institute.

The book advances a racial, feminist, and anti-elite narrative, as well as an anti-neoliberalism narrative.

The book has a chapter on psychological manipulation of consumers and the psychological costs of materialism. My thought: from the book it looks like there's a "non-mindfulness" (a differently loaded term than "mindlessness") in people's consumption. Perhaps the enemy to consumers making better choices is a kind of innocence (a non-mindfulness of "I'm just doing what one does" as a small person). Do we dare shatter (or even less-violently reform) that innocence? Sometimes it feels like it just "should not be done" for some reason, like people should be left in the dark. That's interesting.

--

For some reason I felt like re-reading *Calvin and Hobbes* (comic strip series by Bill Watterson). So I read a collection, *Attack of the Deranged Mutant Killer Monster Snow Goons*. I think the last time I read more than a few strips of *Calvin and Hobbes* was back... in high school? in elementary school? So I had a different perspective reading it now.

I liked the comic strip when I was a kid. I followed Calvin's lead in both good and bad ways, because of the power of the visuals and writing. Reading it now, there is a way that it "sings", there is life in it.

Here's what I think after reading that one collection:

I see Calvin as being the most real character out of all of them. He seems to be the most passionate.

Calvin is the most likely to someday really love God in this life. The others are too cool (Hobbes), too normal and nice (Susie), or too far along in

their path of life (Calvin's parents).

I was surprised by my feelings toward Calvin and Hobbes. When I was a kid, I guess I thought they were kids doing kid things, just like I did. *Calvin and Hobbes* was an adventure comic, showing the adventures of a boy and his tiger friend. But now I see Calvin as a (tragically) heroic figure in a world of fakeness (and, in the long run, insanity), and Hobbes I now dislike, a clever pragmatist who sits outside of Calvin's passions, plays along, but knows better the whole time. Calvin meets Hobbes in brotherhood, but Hobbes offers brotherhood with an asterisk on it. Hobbes thinks Calvin is cute and immature -- disrespects him -- and Calvin does not suspect it.

Calvin and Hobbes bears some resemblance to *Don Quixote*. A lone madman lives in his delusions in a real world that is somewhat unforgiving of him. But who is the real fool in quixotic books? Is it the delusional loner? Or is it all the people around him? From a secular perspective (a practically-atheistic one), obviously it's Don Quixote and Calvin. Everyone's going to die at age 80 and so you should do what's popular, pro-social, socially supported, "consensusly real", in the short run -- there is no afterlife in which to fulfill the fantasies fed you by comic books or chivalrous romances, or to imagine that you can stand outside the social order, live in your own world, as Calvin (and maybe Don Quixote?) effectively does when he daydreams.

Perhaps many theists would side with the secular people, but my theism causes me to say that it's the normal, mainstream, functional people who are fools for not seeking true excellence. While Calvin himself isn't exactly seeking excellence of any sort at this point in his life, he is still clean from the fake-spiritedness of (it seems) everyone around him. He is unwise in many ways, but still not a fool in the fatal way that is most successful in this world. Satan could tempt you with the promise of a slushball to the back of a girl's head, or he could tempt you with an easy life, the approval of others, the sense that you're doing what you're supposed to according to society. Calvin's temptations are ones he is fairly likely to grow out of (certainly he will receive plenty of negative feedback on them). But the temptations of the other characters are ones they may succumb to semiconsciously, never truly confronting them. They may slide toward a state where there is a 1% of ungodliness in them that they never want to get rid of, hardening them. Calvin's sinfulness is accessible and blatant, but theirs does not stand out, and they are acceptable in their community.

My theory of the worldview of *Calvin and Hobbes* is that Calvin is a daydreamer but also in touch with the world of spirits. Hobbes being the main proof, a "friend" who knows better than Calvin.

Is it possible that Calvin's subconscious is more mature than Calvin and can create Hobbes? What is the subconscious self? Is it really you? If

you're a materialist (like Freud?) and you have to stuff all phenomena that does not come from the material world surrounding a person into the operations of a person's material brain, there being no other place to locate it, and for some reason you have to say that "the mind is what the brain does" and somehow that the self is identical to the mind, I guess you're forced to say that. But as a philosophical idealist, I don't think that's a very natural way of looking at phenomena like Hobbes. I think the subconscious self is "not you", something other than you, unless you adopt it as your own. If the subconscious self is wiser than you, is on another level, then there is a wiser spirit (wise like God, or wise like Satan) operating in your life. For Calvin this spirit is visible to him in the imaginal world.

Why is Hobbes in Calvin's life? Perhaps Hobbes, like most things, is a negotiation between God and Satan. God wants Calvin, the world's most alone person, to have a friend to comfort him. Calvin, like Job, is a thorn in Satan's side, someone who has not yet confirmed one of Satan's theories about human nature. Satan then exacts a concession from God: this friend will have to disrespect Calvin behind his back, and feed Calvin society's wine of fakeness through his nagging hints that Calvin is a fool, in such a way that Calvin doesn't realize what's going on. (Hobbes is sensible, moderate, wise, and in favor of romance -- exactly the sorts of things that will win a young man praise from his society.) Because of the power of Satan in Job-like situations, God makes the concession, and a spirit is chosen to do the job, a spirit to be called "Hobbes".

Labels: #childhood, #clothing, #economics, #fair trade, #friendship, #holiness, #politics, #psychology, #what is a person?

MSLN and Evangelicalism

%msln-and-evangelicalism

Friday, July 14, 2023

I am thinking of posting links to this post on outside sites. If you have come from one of those links, this post is about the New Wine System (a system of Biblical doctrines) developed/discovered by Philip Brown. I last read the comprehensive book on the subject that he wrote, New Wine for the End Times*, about 10 years ago (when I was 25) and though it seemed to be convincing to me at the time, I haven't been able to reassess it from my more critical, older-self perspective. I will suggest that it is probably at least as Biblical as Reformed, Lutheran, Catholic, etc. doctrinal systems, possibly more so. In other words, it has at least as good a claim as any of those to being what was originally meant by the Biblical writers (or by God in his role as author of the Bible), possibly more so.*

Being more philosophical than scholarly, I believe in the New Wine System more through reasoning, this taking up much of my efforts as a writer. My project called "MSLN" attempts to prove the existence of God (one whose nature requires/implies the New Wine System), is more complicated, more of a work in progress. However, I have also written up a simpler argument for the New Wine System which presupposes that the reader believes in God (a certain kind of God that many Christians and possibly some non-Christians would accept as the one they believe in), in an 8 page booklet called Simple New Wine System.

I'm not sure how Philip Brown would summarize the New Wine System (I mention that as some degree of deference to him since the label "New Wine System" originates with him.) I will summarize it as I understand it as being the following two ideas: 1) we must become completely holy (repent 100%, come to have God's values and heart 100%, love God with 100% of our beings, overcome our sinful habits in partnership with God 100%, perform any positive acts that God requires, maybe other things like that) in order to enter heaven (or else we must be destroyed in hell (annihilationism)), 2) there is a realistic amount of time for us to complete our part of this process, in the Millennium/ Resurrection.

To some extent this post may be unwelcoming in the sense that I don't discuss it in terms that would make the most sense to someone unfamiliar with my writing. I think that writers try to be trust-producing (so that they have an audience), but sometimes that outstrips their trustworthiness. Someday maybe I will be so confident in the trustworthiness of what I say that I will present what I say in a more popular way. I think I'm moving in that direction, even with this post.

I'm trying not to get into the Bible or Christianity too much at this point in my writing life. However, MSL, the natural theology I do want to talk about, shares many structural similarities with Christianity (and with legitimism (the "L" in "MSL") could be seen as a proto-Christianity or minimalist Christianity).

So this post is trying to talk about "evangelicalism", which is a phenomenon in MSL, but also a phenomenon in Biblical Christianity. So talking about "evangelicalism" is something that serves the purpose of understanding MSL, but also shows how New Wine Christianity might "reform" or "restore" existing Biblical Christianity, perhaps solving some practical problems the church faces, and thus helps me explain the appeal of MSLN to some Christians.

"Evangelicalism", here, is not about cultural affiliation with "Evangelicals", but rather is a basic attitude, which could be something like this:

> 1. People are at risk for something other than loss of secular life. (Usually, for loss of eternal life.)
> 2. The way to deal with that risk involves that we care about others' well-being and act on that.
> 3. There are consequences to our inaction (or misguided action) with respect to #1. (People being lost from eternal life, usually.)
> 4. We should care about those consequences and feel and act accordingly.

Does MSL commit me to evangelicalism?

Does MSL commit me to evangelicalism? I think so. One interpretation of MSL would imply that if people don't do their part in "anti-tempting" people so that they turn toward God, God can do it in the Millennium. Therefore, under that interpretation, people would not have to care for other people's salvation. I suppose that's possible. But another possibility is that tragedy is possible. God is not so much in control that he can make up for all our deficiencies. This may sound impious, lacking in regard for God. A God who is great should be powerful, right? Who are we to not think God is great? So we must think he is powerful.

But what is the truth? Not everything that happens in this life seems like it comes from God. Maybe it's as simple as, it's not something God wants. (Atheists can provide strong examples of horror and suffering. Jews have had to struggle with the Holocaust as a religious fact, and it should concern us just as it does them.) But if God doesn't want it, then it's possible for things to happen that go against God's plan. My belief is that

God always has a plan for everyone's life. But people's choices (whether their own, or other people's) send their lives down different tracks, so that God's first-choice plan ("plan A") gets replaced with his second-place plan ("plan B") or eventually further down the alphabet. And some of those plans that are far from plan A have to involve horror, lies, and suffering, and temptations to despair, delusion, and rejection of God.

What force compels God to allow our lives to become gratuitously bad? God is a holy God, so he can't will us to sin. He is unable to tempt us. But temptations help produce holiness (part of being like God is to turn against sin, ourselves -- so sin has to be presented as a positive thing for us to really strongly do that). Who will tempt us except evil beings? These evil beings then can refuse to work for God in their roles as tempters unless they get concessions, concessions such as a world that contains gratuitous evil. One of these evils might be that God is contractually not allowed to do all of the work he would otherwise do himself (more competently than we would), so we have to do some of it ourselves. Of course, it's good for us to do some of the work, for our own sakes. We anti-tempt ourselves when we care for other people. But there are times when we are not competent in doing our job (or not willing to do it), and there are consequences to that, which fall outside God's desires (and thus are tragic).

While it's always possible that God and Satan negotiate a world where God can do all the anti-tempting necessary, so that if someone rejects him it's 100% their decision, I don't know of any reason from MSL that would make me say I could assume that was the case. So there is uncertainty.

> According to this post, God must do everything he can do to save us. Any lack of salvation is due to us, and he must provide us the ideal environment to be saved. So how could God fail to make up for our deficiencies in anti-tempting?
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> God cares about the salvation of his creatures. In order to have his heart, we must do the same. In order to be saved, we must have his heart. So we must care about the salvation of his creatures to be saved. The best way to do this is through practice.
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> It may also be the case that the most effective way for us to take this practice seriously is for us to be responsible in some way for others' salvation, in a way that does not get made up by God. After all, nobody makes up for what God does, so God's heart has to face that level of responsibility.
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> There's a trade-off between the benefit to the worker (who needs to have a reason to take the work seriously) and a risk

> to the one helped (or who should have been helped, if the worker doesn't do their job). God balances these two, and the result is that to some extent we are responsible for the eternal well-being of other people.
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> This makes sense to me, and I'm at least provisionally inclined to believe that it simply is the case. But if I want to doubt it, I think I still have to see it as a live possibility.

What is the best way to handle uncertainty? I can think of two natural intuitions. One is to say something like "agnosticism about the existence of God should lead to practical atheism" -- if you can't know about something, assume it doesn't matter. I think this is a fairly common one in culture. But, for people into risk management (some businesses, government, the military, effective altruism), certain uncertain outcomes are worth preparing for or trying to prevent. Practically speaking, if you have a solid-enough idea that God might exist, and of what that would entail, you should act as though God exists (in keeping with how likely you think God might exist), even if you are agnostic.

So which approach should we take, with respect to the possibility that people are needed to produce the best outcome with respect to the salvation of other people? If people aren't needed, and we try anyway, and we do a good job, then there are no downsides. And, if people aren't needed and we try, and do a bad job, whatever mistakes we make will be offset by good decisions God makes in anti-tempting them. (At least, in terms of whether people reach heaven, our mistakes will cause no lasting harm.)

But consider the case where people are needed. If we don't try (or don't do a good job), then there could be tragic consequences.

So I think the natural choice for a believer of MSL is to value evangelicalism. I would say "the natural choice is to live it", and I think most should, but perhaps some could lack competence or good-heartedness to the extent that they might feel it wisest to do nothing evangelical. But, if so they would be doing so for an evangelical cause (by getting out of the way).

What if we are uncertain whether MSL is true or not? To the extent that we think it might not be true, we should consider other goods besides eternal life. But to the extent that we think it probably is true, we should be evangelicals.

What kind of evangelicalism would

MSL produce?

Michael Spencer's "Wretched Urgency" talks about evangelical (in the sense I use) church culture that is sort of "crazy". (It's a fleshed-out example from someone who saw that world better than I have.) I would use the term "dishonest" (people forcing themselves to care about things they don't naturally care about). Also, people who are focused heavily on conversions and not the moral life.

Isn't the moral truth that we should save people from hell, and go about it by converting them? But why does that go against what the New Testament seems to exemplify? Spencer makes the point that there isn't much about preaching to the lost in the New Testament. It happens, but the emphasis is more on morality.

The MSLN answer is: if you don't focus on morality, *you* could be one of the lost. The person you have the greatest chance of reaching to prevent eternal loss is yourself. We know ourselves the best of anyone (although we can sometimes be self-deceived or misguided), and we have the advantage of being able to just obey ourselves when we tell ourselves to repent, with an act of unilateral will. In some sense we can will that other people repent, but also, we are powerless. A mistake that evangelicalism can make is to try to push people to the point of repenting, using pressure and manipulation. MSL and New Wine evangelicals should not do that, and it doesn't make as much sense for them to do so, unlike in some non-New Wine Christianity where it does more so.

In MSLN, while the need and call for holiness is absolute, the time period in which people can pursue holiness is greatly expanded over what we get in secular time. So it doesn't make as much sense to be "wretchedly" urgent. You can dilute your urgency, not to the point that there is none, but you aren't forced into "wretchedness" by the fact of the brevity of secular life -- instead of saying "if this person doesn't change before the end of this life, they will go to hell" you say "if this person doesn't change before the end of this life, that's not the best sign but it's not certain they will go to hell". Because your urgency is diluted, you don't have to drive yourselves and other people as hard in response.

I grew up in a church that in my memory was "practically non-evangelical". This is a term I made up -- "practical non-evangelicalism" (PNE) parallel to "practical atheism". A nominal Christian may really be atheistic in how they prefer, act, and trust ("practically atheistic"), and a nominal evangelical may be non-evangelical in how they prefer, act, and trust. PNE can happen when you have all the doctrinal ingredients necessary to be evangelical, but you just don't derive evangelicalism from them. You might do this by technically still believing in hell and lostness, but just never preaching about it. Maybe the older half of the congregation

has memories of the "wretched days", so the Spencer-like preachers emphasize all the things Spencer does (including spiritual maturity, and feeling OK instead of guilty all the time), and the younger half of the congregation, having only heard Spencer-like preachers and not the culture Spencer-like preachers are responding to, again, may have some technical sense that hell exists (it's mentioned in the Bible, after all), but has no real concept that that's a real thing, no concept that people have eternal as opposed to secular well-being, and thus do not care about their own or other people's eternal well-being. It has seemed to me that this sets up two problems: 1) we love people less because less is at stake, 2) we make secular well-being our real concern, and then as soon as the secular world cares for this well-being better than religious people do, religion will have no purpose and die out. #2 matters if there's some reason why God is supposed to matter to us, and we come to know God through people having concern for people (concern in the name of God / religion).

Typically, I like to solve as much of my problems as I can with principles, and avoid laws and practical wisdom. If you can found your thought structure on good basic truths, then everything should follow well. Get your basic truths right, if you possibly can, to save you work in the law-writing and practical wisdom phases. I think it's hard to avoid laws and the need for practical wisdom, though. But with better principles, I think MSLN should do a better job than traditional evangelicalism.

However, traditional evangelicalism isn't totally a failure from an MSL/ New Wine perspective. That is, from my natural-theological point of view, it does some good, and probably more good than bad, and even from Spencer's Biblical point of view, it was successful in conveying at least some concern for morality and it did transmit the Bible which he uses to correct "wretched evangelicalism". The messed-up, simplistic version of something might be popular and powerful, at least for a time. I don't think it makes sense to ignore the special genius of "wretched evangelicalism", which is that, though "wretchedly urgent", it actually was urgent. That's not something to dismiss lightly, and it is not good to substitute "wretched urgency" with a "wretched apathy".

What we want is excellence. How do we achieve that? An athlete has to train hard, and even risk injury, in order to be excellent. But, they have to have good technique in order to be excellent. I think that traditional evangelicalism lends itself to bad technique. But being too concerned with health leads to lack of effort. I think MSLN brings better technique in that morality (holiness, spiritual maturity) is part of the goal. You can singlemindedly pursue the goal of salvation of the lost and still attend to morality. That takes care of one of the failure modes of traditional evangelicalism, that "consequentialism" (evangelicalism) "tempts us to sacrifice deontology/virtue ethics" (tempts us to sin, fail to be good, fail to expect goodness from others).

It's possible to associate "spiritual maturity" with healthy living (with secular well-being), such that healthiness (especially mental health) is an inherent part of spiritual maturity. I think it is more dangerous to overemphasize health than to overemphasize effort (because if health is your idol you might not get punished for it like you probably will with effort). But health is a valid concern, and does play into the longevity of a religious movement (if everyone burns out, the movement loses ability to expend effort in the long run). I don't know if I've written about this on this blog, but my belief is that legitimism implies that, since the good is the best thing, we should put the good first, and be willing to sacrifice everything to the good. (Legitimacy is the good, God is the good, and both MSL's "Father" and "Son" persons of Legitimacy (the good) risk their existences in order to conform to Legitimacy. God is self-obedient.) This implies that willingness to pursue "the cross" (risking yourself for the sake of the good) is essential to salvation. We can't let health get in the way of that, and MSLN calls for the cross more clearly than non-New Wine Christianity. But, you pursue the cross attempting not to destroy yourself but to be effective, and effectiveness calls for a concern for health. I don't think MSLN clears up this on the level of principle, occasioning law and/or practical wisdom to make sense of this. (Maybe Jesus' example of only dying on one cross and avoiding all the others is helpful.) (Also "Give to health what is health's and to God what is God's" as in this story)

What MSLN does do is say that if you're pushing too hard, in your pursuit of working for your salvation or others' salvation, and you are starting to burn out, you can say "Well, there's time in the Millennium, so I don't have to make this effect happen now, so I can take a break". But if you're becoming too apathetic, you can say "Wait, there's something real at stake, I need to go to work. Who can say if my work won't help someone escape hell?" MSLN's ideas about how reality is set up allow us to move away from either extreme position of "there is no work to be done for God, only to attend to secular well-being, if that" and "the work for God is so urgent that we need to pursue it dishonestly, insanely, etc.". MSLN is in the middle, motivating work for God without too often leading to "wretched urgency".

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Perhaps, to sum up so far, the problem with evangelicalisms are that they can be unhealthy, dishonest, immoral, "wretched", and thus be counterproductive.

A traditional evangelical could keep their "heaven or hell when you die" perspective and say "while it looks as though there is an intense, burning urgency to help people find God, what actually works to achieve that is to not think about that or in those terms, otherwise you become unhealthy, dishonest, immoral, 'wretched', etc.". In other words, things are "not what they say on the tin". You might naively think that you should care about

other people and feel the feelings, think the thoughts, etc., that go along with their objective state, and then act on those feelings/thoughts. But actually, you shouldn't care about other people, nor feel those feelings, think those thoughts. Actually, to "really" care about other people is like not caring. Caring is "not what it says on the tin".

When I admired traditional evangelicalism's possession of urgency earlier (even if it might be "wretched"), part of what I thought was good was the way that urgency gets us to actually do things. The doing of things follows from objective reality. Just to see someone as lost gives you a power and direction to do something. Their lostness is a moral truth. How will you respond to that truth? If you don't respond to moral truth, what kind of person are you? Probably someone lacking in moral sensitivity -- having a heart unlike God's.

Perhaps in some grim world the best we can do is live the paradox. Maybe the paradox lurks in non-New Wine evangelicalism (at least all the non-"wretched" varieties), and the best we can do is be paradoxical.

With MSLN, you don't need to distance yourself from the objective fact of someone else's lostness in order to relate to it in a healthy, honest, moral, non-"wretched" way. So then the "MSLian" or New Wine Christian can better maintain their connection to the fact of lostness. They can trust the category of "objective truth" more. They can derive strength from the truth in a way that a paradox-minded person can't. They can be more passionate, and thus will probably be more fruitful than they would have been as "paradoxical traditional evangelicals" or "practical non-evangelicals".

This assumes that MSLN (a set of ideas) is well-implemented by the people who adopt it. And like anything, it might not be well-implemented if its adherents do a bad-enough job. But MSLN itself isn't starting them off at as much of a disadvantage as the other views do.

Can MSL evangelicalism be trusted by traditional evangelicals?

This post is written at least in part so that non-New Wine evangelicals might consider New Wine evangelicalism. One question such people might have is "We think that what matters is that people make a decision for Jesus -- that they are converted. Could the New Wine System be a scam that gets us to no longer emphasize that thing, which we have always thought mattered? What if we mistakenly believe the New Wine System, although it is false, and fail to do work we should have done, and people go to hell who otherwise would not have?"

I do think that being concerned about intellectual scams is valid, and that

a change in the beliefs that affect what you consider highest is one to make carefully and aware of the risk. A New Wine person like myself, considering traditional evangelicalism's arguments if they were presented to me, might feel like they are a scam, to get me to give up my concern over holiness's role in salvation. Traditional evangelicalism at its worst produces shallow believers who think they are 100% OK in the eyes of God (effectively -- they know "they are sinners" but don't think being a sinner is really a bad thing since they are guaranteed to go to heaven). In this regime of moral shallowness, people can harden on little sins that they like, and in some areas become deaf to the voice of Jesus. So traditional evangelicalism, when it succeeds at what it thinks is sufficient to save people, could bias some people toward choosing hell, if in fact New Wine evangelicalism is correct. Both evangelicalisms are potential scams, depending on your perspective.

How can you choose between two potential scams? (Especially when, in this area, all the alternatives are potential scams, things that if you adopt them might cause you to take focus off of what really matters.)

How much are New Wine and traditional evangelicalism in tension, practically speaking? Maybe in practice they achieve the same ends, more or less.

Conversion matters to a New Wine person because it enables people to point themselves in a better direction with respect to God. It's part of holiness as I understand it. Can you reach God without a conscious trusting relationship to him? No. Likewise traditional evangelicals (despite "wretchedness") still teach holiness.

It's true that MSL doesn't require a person to trust in Jesus by that name. In some languages, Jesus is known as "Yeshua" or "Isa", not "Jesus", so it's not the string of letters that is essential to the name of Jesus, but rather some minimal set of traits in the person associated with that name, that makes the name really the name of Jesus. MSL does require trust in Legitimacy/the good/God in multiple persons, does require that that God take on the form of a limited personal being such as we are and die, and I think (although I'd have to check), most of what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount (one exception being his call to keep the Law) are implied by MSL. I think if you want to implement the idea of a good God, and a good God in human form, according to MSL's view of God and goodness, you might well recreate many or most of the sets of traits of Jesus, when looking at the person of Legitimacy who takes on limited form, such that it makes sense to give that person the name of Jesus. However, not having spelled out all of the essential traits of Jesus, nor of all the implications of MSL, I can't say that MSL preaches Jesus, exactly. If it doesn't, it gets people relatively close to trust in Jesus, but that might not be close enough for the comfort of some traditional evangelicals.

(If the name "Jesus" or something etymologically similar is one of the minimal essential traits that identify Jesus, then MSLians could easily use that name to refer to the person of Legitimacy that resembles the Biblical Jesus. I've used "the Son" before in MSL contexts, which might also be adequate. I suppose this is only a fair thing to do if we can identify the other minimal essential traits of the Biblical Jesus as well as the full MSL conception of its "Son", and the two line up sufficiently that they refer to the same being.)

However, New Wine Christianity (as opposed to the MSL natural theology) holds Jesus as high as any other kind of Christianity. Evangelical Christians do not need to convert to MSL, but rather to New Wine Christianity, if they find the ideas held in common between MSL and the New Wine System convincing.

Yet they still might be concerned about the existence of MSL. Could MSL be leading people astray, to 99% of what it takes to be saved (having an understanding of the limited person of God that almost amounts to the Jesus that is the way, truth, and life), but stop them before going 100% (really believing in Jesus)? From one perspective, we could say "well, among all the not-100% versions of the truth that are out there, this one is better than most". But I'm sensitive to concerns about coming up with something that is 99% right and therefore highly trust-producing but which is fatal by not going the full distance. I think (I hope I've said this before and say it later by way of emphasis) that MSL naturally calls us to say "we don't know everything that we might need to know about God and we're listening to hear the answer". An MSLian certainly should listen to a traditional evangelical talk about Jesus, and I think naturally would welcome hearing about their ideas and considering adopting them. Why not become a Christian, at least in some minimal sense? Hopefully that (if put into practice as much as it should be) would reduce the danger of MSLians not hearing the truth about Jesus that traditional evangelicals possess. I don't think the world (in this life, at least) is ever completely safe, nor is any state of affairs not at all apt for concern. The traditional evangelical must consider the danger that they are wrong and MSL is right, just as the MSLian should consider the danger that they are wrong and traditional evangelicalism is right.

What if the New Wine System causes us to not be as concerned with converting non-believers, given that they can be converted in the next life (according to the New Wine System), and we miss opportunities to convert them in this life which is all we get for this task (according to traditional evangelicalism)? This is a fair concern, and I can see a real risk here. One way to resolve the tension is epistemic. If the truth says the danger is "here" and not "there", then that settles what to do. (Though I'm trying to talk about risk management in this section, ultimately you should believe what's true rather than focusing on trying to be safe.) I think the New

Wine System is favored by the truth, but the reader should make up their own mind.

It may be the case that the New Wine System is more effective at producing conversions than traditional evangelicalism. Traditional evangelical conversionism is something I would expect to produce a strong feeling at one point in life which may or may not lead to a lifelong commitment. It's a good way to increase a church's size in the short run. But what kind of people become leaders in a church?

What if churches were full of people who were leaders, who were examples of people living like there's something other than human flourishing that matters or in some other way were deeply and genuinely living like God exists, and who were deeply and genuinely concerned about their neighbors' spiritual lives (that they aim toward the person of God consciously, and that they come into tune with God morally even if they sometimes do that unconscious of the person of God). The New Wine System might be expected to increase congregants' seriousness as Christians at the same time as it decreased (but not to zero) their emphasis on having to convert people in this life. Possibly more people would become the kind of people who could convert others, by increasing their own trustworthiness through the pursuit of holiness, and by taking their faith seriously enough to love and reach out to the people who don't have it, even if their individual urgency to convert decreased. It could be the case that the New Wine System would perform well from a conversionist point of view (although that remains to be seen).

Another perspective is that the church universal is an ecosystem. Traditional evangelicals are effective at conversionism, but they sometimes are "wretched". People who are converted by traditional evangelicalism but don't do well in traditional evangelical churches leave -- perhaps they leave Christianity entirely. Or perhaps they go to a PNE, liberal/mainline, progressive, Catholic, or Orthodox church (maybe even fundamentalism would sound better than traditional evangelicalism to some). Each of these variants of Christianity provide homes that people might like to stay in -- they are not all in line with the truth (they couldn't all be since they differ from each other doctrinally), but they serve a purpose.

The existence of New Wine doctrine allows PNE, and possibly also liberal/mainline and progressive Christianity to move in a more evangelical direction -- and thus as a byproduct produce more conversions. The New Wine System is more congruent with PNE (and maybe some liberal/mainline and progressive) Christian cultures, would be more fitting for the kind of people attending there.

From this, a committed traditional evangelical might look on the New Wine System as being among a number of doctrines that are not completely valid, but not the worst of them. And possibly also as a less-

risky thing to consider believing and recommending to others.

Some editing issues explain the redundancy of the following paragraph:

That goes for New Wine Christianity. But MSL might sound risky, still, if it does not insist on the name of Jesus. I think that the exact same belief can move one person closer to the truth, and another person further. It's possible for MSL to move people from atheism and non-Christian spirituality toward theism, and while MSL does not force people to accept the Bible logically, it does recommend the Bible to some extent, I think. (I haven't done all the thinking that I feel I should on this subject, but on the surface, because MSL sounds like a proto-Christianity or minimalist Christianity, it makes Christian scriptures seem like they might be from God. And, as I said before, an MSLian should have the sense that they may not know enough about God.) Depending on how things turn out, this could lead non-Christians to become Christians who otherwise wouldn't have, although the risk remains that some people would think that the name of Jesus wasn't necessary for salvation, given that an intermediate step in becoming a Christian did not insist on that.

Maybe practically speaking, we should seek to prefer, act, and trust according to both MSL and traditional evangelicalism (should both aim for complete holiness and seek to convert and be converted). If those were the only two versions of the purported truth out there, I think it would be easy for me to try to satisfy both personally, and emphasize both in my behavior to other people. I feel like MSL "has nothing against" conversion, and traditional evangelicalism "has nothing against" holiness. I personally find MSL and the Bible the only options I'm interested in obeying, and so that doesn't seem like a huge leap to me, and perhaps the reader is in the same situation. Then, neither belief system is practically speaking risky from the other's perspective.

But, if I'm trying to be openminded, I consider the possibility of views like Islam, or "Christianity+" religions like Roman Catholicism and Mormonism. Do I have to satisfy Muslim doctrine? I think MSL rules out Islam's insistence on its version of the oneness of God (this is not my official opinion, but seems like a safe guess about the Islam I've heard of). I can't satisfy both Islam and Christianity at the same time. But could I satisfy Catholic or Mormon Christianity along with the Christianity of the 66 book canon I grew up with? I don't know. What if there was some little sect of Christianity, 200 members strong, in some obscure part of the world, that taught that salvation requires a certain kind of faith in God, the real faith that died out in the first century, a specific kind of faith that they know about, and this is the only way to avoid hell? So I have to have their kind of faith? What if it conflicts with MSL and traditional evangelical faith? Can I know that such a sect does not exist and that they are not right? Sure, they are small and thus I might claim are insignificant, but the church was small in the first century.

Is it easy to know the truth, and know that you know the truth, sufficient to prefer, act, and trust so that you are saved? Maybe not. If not, and God exists, and God loves you, and God wants to achieve what satisfies his desires, wouldn't he provide you a way to come to know whatever truth is needed for salvation, whether in this life or a later one? This is essentially an argument against traditional evangelicalism and for something like MSL. This doesn't mean that it doesn't matter what we believe in this life, but that the significance of, what kind of beliefs we believe in this life, is diluted by the provision of God for an afterlife where hopefully the epistemic environment for our trusting of God is more favorable. (If it's useful in saving us, I think we will be given clarity someday.)

Are traditional evangelicals more afraid of hell than they believe that God exists, loves us, and wants to achieve what satisfies his desires? If so, then it makes sense to be suspicious of MSL and the New Wine System. Otherwise, no.

What about "dark evangelicalism"?

This section is somewhat of a footnote or note to myself, not as well-thought-out, and weirder.

Someone could object that maybe God is not ultimately in control enough of the process of salvation, such that he can't guarantee a clearing-up of salvation doctrine later. This does not sound like traditional evangelicalism, whose God is simply omnipotent. But one could imagine a dark evangelicalism, where people need to hear about God in this life to be saved, and God is powerless to give them a second chance.

God really loves, and God doesn't want any of us to be lost. He doesn't create any of us to go to hell. God would not create us if he knew that there was a chance any of us were bound for hell at the time of creation, which would be the case if he didn't provide a way for us to be saved (like an afterlife where we could hear the truth adequately). We might end up going to hell, through the mishaps of life and our turning away from him, but to not provide something like the Millennium would be an unforced error on his part.

So now the "dark evangelical" has to claim that God is not fully or sufficiently loving. But this contradicts the Bible. The Bible says (1 John 4:8) that "God is love". If God was not fully loving, love itself would not be fully loving. Or, if "God is love" is a figure of speech for "God is loving", the love that we have comes from God (1 John 4:7), so we can't exceed God in being loving. And I would assume we can't exceed God in practical wisdom. (Although maybe a "dark evangelical" would contest that? I think creating the world would require a lot more practical wisdom than living one human life.) So if a human can figure out that it doesn't make sense to

make an unforced error that prevents people from going to heaven, and doesn't do it out of love, God would also be able to figure that out, and wouldn't do it. So the Bible does not give support to the idea that God is insufficiently loving to avoid "dark evangelicalism".

A traditional evangelical (we will say) believes in "sola scriptura" and so would reject the dark position for being unbiblical. But an "MSLian" might take the dark evangelical position seriously. Is there evidence for dark evangelicalism?

Possibly some can be found in MSLN itself, at least in the first two arguments (the Metaphysical Organism (M) and simantism) (S). The idea that God has to be fully loving is developed in legitimism (L), where love is a form of value, everything that exists is at least temporarily legitimate, Legitimacy has to value what is deserving, everything that is legitimate is deserving, and so everything that is not illegitimate (something like "sinful") is something that Legitimacy must value/love/will-to-exist-forever. But if a student of MSLN does not accept L but only M or MS (S implies M), would they have any reason to think that God is loving, sufficient that he would have to be competent in choosing whether to create us?

The Metaphysical Organism, and by extension the Speaker, is a being of perfect empathy. They feel exactly what we feel. While I don't know how to measure how much unbearable pain there is in our world, I think there is a lot of it, probably unrelenting for thousands (or perhaps millions?) of years. The Metaphysical Organism/Speaker would likely understand this long duration, unrelentingness -- perhaps understand after a few weeks of the load of pain, and then think "is it worth going on?" If they decided to, it would be an action of love, tested over the years by the constant or near-constant barrage of qualia of unbearability. They would show their value for creation by the pain they were willing to bear for us. So the pain and tragedy of creation gives us a reason to think they love us enough to not create if things were going to be really hopeless.

Under M or MS, why would the MO/Speaker need us to accept Jesus as our savior? I don't know of a reason off the top of my head. Why would they require any particular thing for salvation? I can understand them not being able to keep us around if we insist on doing unbearable things or being unbearable to them. But otherwise, why would we have to do any particular thing, like make a decision for Jesus? In MSL, it makes some sense because part of being legitimate is to trust/follow Legitimacy and if Jesus is who he says he is, he is part of Legitimacy. Accepting someone like Jesus is part of MSL. But it's not as clearly a part of M or MS.

A reason why the Speaker could be known to love us is because he created the simantic word of "love", and so understands it deeply himself. Thus, if we can apprehend it and participate in it, we know what he knows. If we

know that love is greater than its competitors, he knows that, and will see love as we do, so that he will only create if there is a chance for each of us to be saved. (He know sadism (for instance) as well, but perhaps if you understand love and sadism perfectly, you will always automatically choose love as the best, and sadism as not measuring up.)

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People think they have experiences of God. Probably they do sometimes, if it's sufficiently possible that God exists. Is God loving? I think for most people (maybe even in different religions?) he is. God is supposed to be trustworthy, and somehow he tells us he is. Not everyone experiences him this way necessarily, but I would guess it's the majority view and maybe that should count for some kind of evidence.

Maybe we could view religious experience as experience with spirits (some of whom claim to be God, or working for God), as opposed to with God. If the spirits are trustworthy (we know from relating to them), maybe if they tell us that God is loving, we should believe them?

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If something claims our practical attention (our trust and/or obedience), if the credence we can give it is below a certain amount, it's as likely as so many other conflicting things that it's not worth worrying about. Can dark evangelicalism rise above that threshold? It's an open question. Can it be deemed likely enough, and also recommend a clear-enough course of action, that we can trust and/or obey it?

Labels: #altruism, #Christianity, #church, #cultural altruism, #evangelicalism, #God, #holiness, #mental health, #morality, #practical non-evangelicalism, #trust

Note: How Many Speakers Can There Be?

%note-how-many-speakers-can-there-be

Saturday, July 22, 2023

This note was originally written to go with Testing / Improving MSL.

How many Speakers can there be? There must be at least one. This one consists of "experience bodies", units of experience. Currently, as I type this in my bedroom, I am experiencing one field of experience. I hear a helicopter outside and feel the chair I sit in. This is all one experience body. It's the whole world I live in, and I know of outside things because of what happens in it.

When the Speaker experiences all other beings in order to speak the word of the universe to us, it may be the case that it incorporates all experience bodies into itself. In that case, it is the universe, but in a sense is distinct from many parts of the universe. In that case, there is only one universe, and one Speaker.

Or, it may be the case that the Speaker only contacts, but does not incorporate, all other beings. How would that connection work? I think that contact (mere touching rather than incorporation), between conscious beings, would involve the two beings having experience bodies with identical contents (one being's experience body being reflected by at least one of the other being's), that would necessarily track each other. The will of one being could affect the contents of both experience bodies.

In the case that the Speaker only contacts, rather than incorporates, everything that exists in the universe, then it contains its own experience bodies (those peculiar to it) as well as a reflection of everything else. A second Speaker has to contain its own experience bodies, as well as a reflection of everything else -- which includes the reflections made by the first Speaker. But once the second Speaker makes those reflections, the first Speaker has to reflect all of the second Speaker's new reflections. This rapidly increases the number of experience bodies that have to exist.

Is there an infinite supply of experience bodies? If not, then the supply would rapidly run out, and one or both Speakers could not speak the universe to people. I tend to think there are no actual infinities, and that the burden of proof is on people who want to say that there are, or could be.

So this gets us to lean toward saying there's only one Speaker, but doesn't get us all the way, since someone may show that actual infinities exist, or could exist.

Do Speakers constantly speak the word of the universe? Or could they just take breaks from it? I feel like I have an intuitive sense of the whole of reality, whatever that cashes out to. In my most "in the moment" moments, it might just be my own experience body that I'm in with its present experiences. Other times that whole of reality image expands to include things I don't see at the time, perhaps even to the distant past and future, stars, quarks, all other minds. But I always relate in some way to the whole of reality, no matter how I construe it in the moment. I think this is a fundamental part of being a conscious being, that you see what you see, sensorily, noetically, and imaginally, and see that it is everything. The word of the whole of reality is being spoken to everyone, which connects to all that there is -- the word of the universe.

Another thought: imagine that there are two Speakers who speak the universe to people. How different could they be? They would experience each other, and thus have the exact same thoughts and feelings. If they did, how could they intend different things? What else is there to a person other than their experiences? Perhaps the decisions that those experiences make (their free wills). In other words, if there are two experience bodies that are contacting each other and thus have identical contents, they differ by having different wills, and these two wills negotiate depending on their power to determine the experience within the two experience bodies. So if there were two persons who had exactly the same experiences, who contacted each other, but had opposing wills, what would that look like? Maybe the two wills would be like adding two vectors, and reduce to one new vector, one new will. In that case, any two Speakers who speak the universe at the same time would automatically merge into one person with the same experiences and will. Maybe there could in some sense be internal conflict in them due to the two non-aligned wills that make up the one resultant will, but like any person with internal conflict, they could relate to the outside world as one person, and experience themselves as one person albeit with inner conflict. Or it may be the case that two free wills that merge leave no conscious trace of their conflict.

Labels: #note, #philosophy, #what is a person?

Consensus Reality and Psychological Warfare

%consensus-reality-and-psychological

Friday, July 28, 2023

This is an essay.

Atheists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other people in a society (for instance, Western society) disagree about many things. But some things, they all (or seemingly all) agree on. There is a span of life between birth and "physical death" (the last breath in the bodies we currently have) which all of them acknowledge. In that span, there is the need for food, shelter, clothing, transportation and so on. Food, shelter, clothing, and transportation exist and we have to deal with them -- even enlightened people have to get on the bus if they want to ride it. In Western society, there are schools to go to and for most, jobs to work. There are bureaucracies to deal with. This is all real. This (and similar things) make up consensus reality.

(I thought about putting "science" in that list, but there are "science-deniers" who would not deny the existence of the above. Science is widely favored, but it's not quite literally consensus reality. Maybe we could say that it is near-consensus reality?)

The rest of reality is controversial. Is there such a thing as material substance (or something effectively like that) as atheists often believe? Idealists dispute that. Each of the Gods (or sets of Gods) of the theistic religions is different. Christianity insists on Jesus (God and human in one) as the only way to God, the Father, while Islam insists that you can't associate anyone with God -- perhaps this is a controversy. Hinduism says everything is one thing, while Buddhism sort of says it's all nothing -- perhaps another controversy. Many of us seem to like morality and think it should have binding force on us -- so it would be weird if we thought it didn't exist -- but Nietzscheans officially don't like morality, and moral anti-realists think that it doesn't exist. Academic philosophy has people arguing on different sides of different questions.

It is convenient for us to center our thinking on consensus reality. We can argue about all of those controversial things all day and not persuade each other (that's what it means for them to be controversial). So we think that the solid, real, good truth is consensus reality.

How likely is it that consensus reality exhausts all of what's real and what

matters? At first glance, it sounds like that's not very likely. Why should it be the case that all of the things we agree on are real, and none of the things we don't agree on are real? It's probably a good sign if we all agree on something, but I wouldn't trust that completely. Maybe we could all agree on some moral value that was actually invalid, just because that's what made society run smoothly.

Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism all posit the existence of spirits other than humans. Spirits might be able to affect the minds of people. (Have you ever seen a spirit come over someone, or experienced that yourself?) Spirits might not be all on the same side. Humans disagree and form blocs that want to defeat each other. It doesn't seem unlikely that spirits would do the same.

How would spirits fight? Partly by psychological warfare, trying to convince us of different random things. If they can win us over, we will do their bidding. Or our trust might be the prize in itself. The profusion of non-consensus reality beliefs is something that would make sense if there are different blocs of spirits trying to control our minds with the beliefs that they favor. The difficulty of us being certain about "spiritual" (ethical, metaphysical, religious, etc.) things being in part the result of the damage done by warring beings on the noetic equipment of our minds.

Sometimes I have told non-Christians that I believe in God because of meaning. I can remember two different people who heard that having a knee-jerk "that doesn't work" kind of reaction. They did not say "huh, that's interesting" -- a more philosophical response. They did not seem open to hearing my argument. The people (those two and four others) I can remember talking to about my theories of or interest in proving the existence of God did not react in a philosophical way, nor did they seem eager to explore to see if I was right. One of them even implied that proving the existence of God was impossible (but he would say things he didn't really believe in order to put ideas in my head, I later realized.)

This, in itself, is interesting. Why were they so reactive against the idea of the proof of the existence of God, or a particular way to prove it? Why weren't they interested in learning more? Why isn't this like any other topic where one might think about what is?

I can say that the effect of their reactions to me has got me really questioning my own beliefs sometimes. Sometimes I believe and move forward, other times I don't. After a few of these strange reactions, it breaks down my (sometimes fragile) natural sense of what's true. I can use my intellectual discipline to believe what I do, but my brain is always traumatized by the strange reactions -- I don't want to say they are literally "gaslighting" since I don't want to (always) impute manipulative intent, but what's going on is very much like gaslighting. That trauma makes me "not really believe", doubt my intellectual vision.

Why do the other people traumatize me? They have been through the same thing as me, perhaps, traumatized by other people. So they refuse to listen to me, not trusting me. They believe what they do in a fragile way, and now that they don't know what to believe, they rigidly shut out competitors to what they already believe.

It could also be that we want to believe things -- that beliefs about religion, God, and the lack of religious truth or the non-existence of God, are precious things. They are so foundational that we build our lives around them, and to change your foundations threatens self-destruction. We keep ourselves alive through our inner beliefs.

It may be as frightening to be offered a way to believe in something that you dearly wish to be true, as to be offered a disproof of it.

I probably made the mistake of talking to people who were as old or older than me. Older people lose the ability to really think and question, and instead operate as machines, stable and strong, which just do whatever they were programmed to do while growing up. People can resist this tendency, and it's not universal, but I can feel it in me now. To really question whether God exists requires research -- too much for most mature adults. Immature people have a chance at coming to know what is true. You have to have that immature spirit of adventure in you in order to keep your mind oriented toward knowing what is, rather than becoming aggressively or sadly dogmatic.

Perhaps I misunderstand maturity, and many mature people misunderstand it. It is virtuous to become more mature, not inevitable. It may (seemingly) be inevitable for the young to struggle against the many voices that try to control their minds, and their own inner instability, to try to reach a kind of promised land of being functional in society, stable and secure in mind, patient and emotionally self-regulating. But if this is the "inevitable maturity", the virtuous process of maturity requires that people who (more or less) attain "inevitable maturity" push on to the next stage, which requires them to recover the adventure needed to be in touch with reality.

Where do spirits come in? Spirits can engineer and disseminate new ideas. Time after time, intellectuals, artists, inventors, and so on receive brilliant ideas in "flashes of inspiration". They don't know where they come from. Well, if they don't know where it comes from, it's probably not from them. Where else can it come from? If we insist on materialism, it must come from the "unconscious self". But I don't see why we should insist on materialism -- at best it's one of multiple live options for how the world could work. In any of the others (I'm thinking of dualism and idealism), where spirits are possible, the most natural explanation is that spirits implant these brilliant ideas in these creative people.

I see spirits at play in some of the strange reactions I have to things. I feel like I'm, for better or worse, sick with the same mental sickness as "everyone else" (Western non-Christians). I hear God's voice and see his purpose in my life. But then, sometimes, I read someone saying "humans are really good at seeing patterns in things, humans make meaning". And then that's all I can see in my purported "hearing God's voice".

Why does this seem instantaneously and devastatingly true? Rationally speaking, it's no more weighty than pointing out that sometimes people (seemingly) falsify their own memories. The faculty of memory is not perfect. But I don't think "Oh no! None of my memories are valid!" So the faculty of "finding patterns" is imperfect. But sometimes it shows us things that really are there. Why am I so quick to distrust one faculty and not another? (Actually, now that I write that out, I don't see why I should distrust my instincts of pattern finding, bearing in mind that they are imperfect.)

People say "humans make meaning" in a certain way that implies something. And I fall for it. Why do I fall for it? Is it because I "know", deep down, that it's true? Or is it that I'm under the power of the same spirit as them? Why do they fall for it? I think neither they nor I are being rational. If we were we would see that pattern finding ("meaning making") is something that is basically reliable but with exceptions. Maybe pattern finding when we want something to be true or when the stakes are personal is less reliable? But it could be valid. If you really want someone to be romantically interested in you, it's possible to accurately perceive that they are. But when the implying and the subtext are ruling, I can't even consider that. So there's something fishy going on.

If people are being irrational, or in other words if they are making decisions based on subtext, psychological powers that live in the darkness of intuition, then that world of intuition is a black box. Spirits could take natural intuitions and feed them to produce "reasoning" that the spirits like. Or they could implant entirely new ones.

Does this sound paranoid or crazy? Why does belief in spirits or spirit conspiracies sound paranoid or crazy? Is it weird to think spirits might exist? Not under dualism or idealism. If they do exist, is it weird to think they would behave in concerted ways -- conspiracies? No, because that's how humans sometimes act. It's possible for thoughts of concerted intelligent action to mislead us or make us behave or feel badly. But reality exists regardless of whether we manage to safely believe the truths that correspond to it. Can we approach spiritual warfare in a philosophical way, rather than with heuristics that reject possibilities a priori due to a stigma (nor with spirits possessing us in the very contemplation of those spirits' conspiracies)?

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Whether through natural psychological mechanisms (traumatization and trying to maintain a coherent worldview) or direct spiritual manipulation, the psychological environment for coming to believe the truth about ultimate reality is not ideal. So we have to pay extra attention to what goes on, have more focus, keep our heads together, and have more courage, so that we can come to know the ultimate truth.

Labels: #epistemology, #maturity, #philosophy, #politics, #psychology, #rationality, #religion, #spiritual warfare

Should We Believe Voices, as Though They are From God?

%should-we-believe-voices-as-though-they

Friday, July 28, 2023

It's not uncommon for people to hear voices in their head. Are these the voices of the unconscious self or evolved neural patterns (materialist atheist explanation)? Are these the voices of demons, angels, and/or God? Are these the voices of other spirits (perhaps Severus Snape?)?

Given all those options, it might seem like, who can know where these voices come from?

(I could add in any other kind of communicative signal, like the things that people say that don't make sense in context of the conversation but which speak to your life, or the animals that behave strangely around you and whose natures communicate symbolically about realities inside you.)

Are these from a trustworthy source, or an untrustworthy source? Could we come to the conclusion that a voice is from God (either spoken directly by him or by a faithful messenger)?

Then, if they are from a trustworthy source, can we trust the voice enough to obey it?

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If we can figure out the nature of the world, we can rule out some possibilities. If we can somehow know that materialism is correct, it commits us to the "unconscious self / evolved neural patterns" view. If we can somehow know that God doesn't exist, it rules out the possibility that he is speaking.

Also, if we rule out the possibility of non-personal beings being agents (I think this is a logical conclusion of the belief that everything is consciousness) and if we can know when it is that we do things (I think this makes sense -- if I do something I didn't intend, it wasn't *I* who did it), then all things are caused by conscious personal beings: humans, animals, angels, demons, other spirits, or God, and it wasn't somehow secretly *I* who produced the voice in my head that I didn't manufacture and didn't feel like me.

I believe in (trust, find trustworthy to believe in) the world of the previous paragraph and not the one before that. So I rule out the possibility of it

being somehow "me" or some "unconscious self", and this leaves open the possibility of it being an angel or God (or a demon or some other spirit).

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What is "intuition"? Intuition is something that enables us to know when people are scamming us. It enables us to sense what people are thinking and feeling. A trained intuition can be used for many different tasks, depending on how it was trained. But intuition is just a feeling that something is so, something is to be done, etc. Sometimes we can figure out rationalizations for our intuitions, and sometimes we can't. Much of knowledge is intuitive at its foundation (for instance, the way reason works). We have to rely on intuition. But intuition is opaque as to its sources and inner workings. It's a black box. A spirit could easily work through it.

Where do ideas come from? Many creative and intellectual people report ideas coming to them -- something else was working through them when the idea came. So probably ideas can come from spirits (unless we can prove materialism or some equivalent) and according to the philosophy I believe, certainly do.

The world is full of people who trust intuition or the ideas that come from intuition. But evil spirits could be poisoning our collective thinking through those two sources. Yet, good spirits could be guiding and enlightening us. Once an evil spirit uses these channels to deceive us, perhaps we will need the good spirits to use the same channels to help balance things out.

We have some way of sorting out intuition and/or ideas, into "trustworthy, less trustworthy, somewhat untrustworthy, evil" or similar categories.

So a voice in your head that says something: does it say something trustworthy or not? Often, you can sort something like this out, since often you can sort out which intuitions or ideas are trustworthy or untrustworthy.

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Now, can we know that a particular voice is from God? Any voice that is trustworthy might be from God. A doubter can say "you don't know if it's from God" and if they mean "but it really might be, you have a point", then they are on the side of reason. (Unless they can prove that God doesn't exist, a difficult task.) But if a doubter wants to close off the possibility that it could be from God, then they are not on the side of reason. They close off that possibility as a knee-jerk reaction, or perhaps because they want to control your thinking.

If God exists, and loves us, why wouldn't he want to talk to us? But then,

why doesn't he speak in a very clear way to us? If you're really skeptical, you can always doubt that it's God talking to you. Sure, it's a superpowerful being, like an alien or angel. Sure, it knows a lot. But is it really God? Couldn't it be some kind of scam? Maybe a very good angel who passes himself off as God, but secretly has a dark side? You may never get to certainty even with a God you talk to face to face.

I do think it's possible to prove that God exists (in the sense that the task is one worth attempting), and the particular God that I see a way to prove is one who is bound by his own holiness to allow the world to be worse than he would ordinarily intend. This could mean that he is prevented from talking to us as clearly as he would otherwise want to. It's also possible sometimes that his distance is better for us. We can't "feed" on him the way we do on people, whose words and gestures are solid to us, flesh and blood. So we can have a (perhaps our only) non-vampiric relationship, with him.

Given these constraints, I think we could still expect God to want to communicate to us sometimes, in a more specific way than just "do what is right, which you know to do from logic, experience, and whatever bodies of trustworthy wisdom you might have available" (like the Bible). If he wants to, he probably does sometimes, and when he does, he would do so in a way that at least we would trust what he said, even if we couldn't know 100% that it was him.

In the Bible, Abraham trusts in two notable ways. His overall life story is one of coming to trust God when God says "go to a foreign country" (a demanding thing for Abraham to do) "and I will make you a great nation to bless all the families of the earth". Abraham is being asked to do something that is personally demanding and which is grandiose in its ambitions to make the world a better place. This faith of Abraham is constructive, positive (if crazy) and I feel basically okay with recommending it to people in general. If what the voice calls you to is something like the Abrahamic promise, (assuming that you understand things well enough to know or reasonably guess that what you're doing will "bless all the families of the earth"), even if it was from some other source than God, you would be attempting to do God's work, and if God does say things like this to someone sometimes, that person should be prepared to listen, otherwise great good will not result.

Abraham's other faith is a sort of paradoxical / recursive occasion where God commands him to kill his son Isaac (through whom the promise of his great nation is to come). I call this paradoxical and recursive because it's how in order to pursue something trustworthy, you need to let go of it, not affirm it. The process of blessing the world is outward facing, laminar, positive; but it must purify itself and it's counter-intuitive when it does so.

I don't know all the effects on Abraham of being tested to the point of

being willing to give up his son and risk stopping the very promise that he invested his life in. But one might have been for him to value God more than the promise, and God's provision of well-being more than physical life. Isaac's life could be guaranteed by the fact that he had a functioning body, what atheists could count on. Or it could be guaranteed by God -- somehow -- what atheists would not count on. (Incidentally, on a meta-textual level, the Bible is a text that can be trusted in, wants you to trust in it, but includes a difficult passage (or a few more), difficult even by its own account (the Bible is against child sacrifice). Follow the Bible, but don't grip to it too hard, if you want to obey God.) (Maybe all this is a message for those given to "wretched evangelicalism".)

Now, if taken as a myth, this story is easily digested. If you are going down the path of the promise, God will identify some part of the promise in your life, through which it will come, and push you to the point where you have to decide whether to sacrifice it. It won't be your literal child or anything on that level of disturbingness. If you are willing to sacrifice it, he will give it back to you just like he gave Isaac back to Abraham. The Bible can be read as a collection of existing life patterns (stories, perhaps continually playing out somewhere in the imaginal world) that instantiate themselves in our lives sometimes, used by God to shape us and communicate with us.

But we do not always take it as myth, but rather imagine, what if it really was God, really commanding us to sacrifice our literal children? In that case, I can't recommend obeying such a voice. I think you should assume that it is not from God, because whatever justification could be come up with for God doing that with Abraham (Hebrews 11:17-19 says that Abraham expected God to resurrect Isaac, (my thought:) so confidently that it wouldn't count as murder or God tempting him to murder), nowadays it would go down so poorly, make religion look so bad, that it's not worth it and God wouldn't command it.

When you hear a voice, consider the possibility it's coming from Satan. Some voices are worth obeying even if they prove someday to have been from Satan, especially if we implement what the voices call for in an anti-Satanic way. Other voices are not.

These are some easy answers as to which things to think are from the voice of God, for practical purposes of obedience or investing in promises. (Leaving your home country to bless the world -- generally worth it. Sacrificing your child -- don't do it.) In between, I guess we are left with needing to train our individual intuitive and rational grasping of the nature of God, so that when we hear voices, we can tell which ones are from God. However, there will probably always be times when we are uncertain. (Maybe technically we are always uncertain. But we can be more certain than uncertain, sometimes, while other times we are more uncertain than certain.)

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If what a voice says is trustworthy and could be from God, why not obey it like it is and see where it takes you? You wouldn't want to not obey God if he was trying to get you to do something. It's possible that you're wrong that it's trustworthy, or from God, but sometimes, you should trust your judgment and obey.

Labels: #epistemology, #God, #rationality, #spiritual warfare, #trust

Long Links #3

%long-links-3

Friday, July 28, 2023

On my subreddit I put up links to individual videos, websites, or blog posts, etc. Any of these things can be "consumed" (paid attention to) in one sitting (generally speaking). Those are "short links". But "long links" take (or take me) more than one sitting and to me seem to not belong in the same context as short links.

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Recently (in the last 6 months) I watched the following movies (among others):

My Name is Sarah (a woman finds community and romantic love in an Alcoholics Anonymous group even though she doesn't drink)

The Book Shop (a woman opens a book store in small-town coastal England, has to deal with enemies)

Detroit Unleaded (Two Arab-Americans in the Detroit area -- a young man, who works in a gas station convenience store, and a young woman, who comes from a rich family -- meet and fall in love)

Nowadays, I watch movies to pass the time, not to explore the world of human experience or rewire my brain (more what I was going for when I was in my 20s). I think these movies are not great movies in the way that *Citizen Kane*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Stalker*, or *Testament* are great. But if I wanted to rewatch those great movies, I could, and I could probably find more like them. Nothing really prevents me. But I actually prefer to watch these unassuming movies.

Actually, I think that there is more going on under the surface in these movies that I don't catch because I don't process audiovisual information quickly enough. Films do a lot of hinting because they don't have time to flesh out everything they're trying to portray, and subtle things like that go over my head, although I can see the hints happening and say to myself "they're trying to say something". The films, being unassuming, don't strike my brain hard to make it notice. Perhaps I would understand their ideas better if I rewatched them. I'm not sure I would want to rewatch them, but I could imagine myself doing so if I owned them on DVD and had a hard time getting new media. (Like kids back in the day watching the same VHSes.)

I think it's exactly the fact that these movies don't strike my brain that

hard, or engage in too-strong of visceral engagement, that makes me open to them and like watching them enough to finish them.

I do think that despite that I find them "just to be a way to pass the time", on one level I think even then they do important cultural work by expressing an aesthetic. People can find each other through aesthetics and are encouraged to continue in their personal vibes/aesthetics/sarkars by the bits of time they can spend watching films congenial to them.

These movies are small, quiet, and unassuming. (Not necessarily that the characters or their experiences are, but more that the films themselves don't assert themselves the way that "hard-hitting", "exciting", "sexy", "weighty", "important" movies do.) Although it would not be small, quiet, and unassuming of them, what if those three vibes became greater, or dared to try harder and do bigger things, without losing their roots? I think people carried along by those vibes might be good at doing things that other people are not.

(I think that that last paragraph connects to my own writing a lot. To take one example, I think my book *Letters to People who Care* would fit in to that same set of vibes.)

(Maybe someone who knows more about movies could list some unassuming movies that do something great.)

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I watched two video essays by biz barclay.. One of them on the binding of Isaac, *God is Not Dead*, and *Midnight Mass*, the other on the phenomenon of Snapewives.

The Snapewives one presents the question "what is religion?" and shows a particular new religion. I think its value for me was in showing my own relationship with God in an alien light. The Snapewives' relationships with Snape (their god) sound similar but different from my relationship with God, at least insofar as they hear from Snape and have some degree of devotion to him. The "varieties of religious experience" are profuse and it can seem as though we should give up the search for the real God, since it looks like there's a separate version for each group of people, made in the image of what would serve them. Can I really believe that I am in touch with a person, who is God, rather than am under some kind of force that produces religious experiences of whatever form suit my mind?

I can recommend the other video more highly, especially if, like me, you are someone who is modernist-leaning (i.e. not postmodernist), in favor of being active, in favor of listening to God's voice (an evangelical in some sense of the word?), because it presents the binding of Isaac, a story which in itself shows those pursuits to be dangerous. (The Bible sets dangerous precedents. Also (a la Kierkegaard?) the Bible at least in this story

frustrates logical ethical thought processing (even though overall it supports it). "Formulalessness", perhaps.)

Modernism/activist religion is dangerous. Postmodernism is also dangerous (the inability to be excellent, the inability to do what needs to be done, to coordinate cultural activity, the danger of settling for socially-convenient shared values rather than asking about the possibility of causing harm not currently part of consensus reality, such as harming God, or harming humans in ways the social consensus doesn't recognize.) Is there a counterpoint to the binding of Isaac that shows the dangers of postmodernism or other anti-activity philosophies/cultural drifts? Perhaps the rest of the Old Testament, as a whole, is about that. A counterpart to this video could be one about the call of Abraham (in Genesis 12 and renewed later in Genesis), and the need for society to have crazy (literally mentally ill like we might diagnose Abraham), outsider antagonists to the social order to drive moral progress forward.

Both videos are 3 hours long. I think the video essay format, especially the longer the essays get, lends itself to imparting energy to the viewer and giving them time to think about things. As mentioned above, I don't process audiovisual things the best, so I would latch on to some ideas as they were repeated throughout the video, and then think about them for myself. Maybe part of the comparative advantage of video essays is in this energetic transfer and stewing tendency.

(If you combine the two videos, you get the question "how can you know that God (a specific God) is talking such that you should trust and/or obey the voice you hear?")

Labels: #aesthetics, #epistemology, #film, #modernism, #postmodernism, #religion, #spiritual danger

News: 8 August 2023

%news-8-august-2023

Tuesday, August 8, 2023

I put out a call to test MSL / find problems with it and solutions to those problems.

I made an update worth noting, to How Bad Can Satan Negotiate Reality to Be?; Tastes vs. Values.

That involved doing some philosophy, but I'm still overall taking a break until October 2024.

I started reviewing this blog (re-reading from the beginning). I hope to catch errors (if/when they exist) in my philosophy, but not try to fix them until later.

Labels: #news and meta

Watersheds and Divides

%watersheds-and-divides

Wednesday, August 16, 2023

When I was younger, I would go on road trips with my family to Texas. Along the way, we drove down Interstate 10 through southern Arizona and southern New Mexico. Somewhere in New Mexico, we crossed the Continental Divide. On one side of the divide, water flows downhill to the Pacific Ocean. On the other side, it flows downhill to the Atlantic Ocean. Perhaps two drops of water from the same thunderstorm that land just a few inches away from each other could end up in radically different oceans.

In southern New Mexico along Interstate 10, the Divide is apparently flat. I would not guess that there is a divide there, but the sign on the side of the road says there is.

A divide is a (possibly subtle) change in gradient that causes something, over the long run and in general, to flow toward a different (potentially radically different) destination, than it would have before crossing the divide. A watershed is a "gradient regime" (a kingdom of flow?) that leads toward a particular end.

Labels: #definition, #maturity, #spiritual growth

The Unpardonable Sin; Satanic Miracles; Love and Trust de Re

%the-unpardonable-sin-satanic-miracles

Sunday, August 20, 2023

I re-read *New Wine for the End Times* recently, which serves as a reminder of what kinds of New Wine teachings are in the Bible. The New Wine component of MSL can be illuminated by *New Wine for the End Times*.

One teaching is that of the "unpardonable sin", which is "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit". What does this mean, and should we expect that teaching to be true if all we believe is MSL and not the Bible?

Apparently, according to Philip Brown (author of *New Wine for the End Times*), it's when you see the miracles that attest to Jesus being the Messiah but you deny to yourself what you see. You say it's from Satan rather than from God. (This from Ch. 7 of the book. Ch. 8, which I read after drafting this, is also on the subject, but didn't change my views as expressed in here. (10th ed. of the book.)).

What Brown says seems like a reasonable inference from the Bible. But does the Bible make sense in this area?

Here's one Biblical passage, for reference (Matthew 12:18-32):

> 12:18 "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen; my beloved in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my Spirit on him. He will proclaim justice to the nations. 12:19 He will not strive, nor shout; neither will anyone hear his voice in the streets. 12:20 He won't break a bruised reed. He won't quench a smoking flax, until he leads justice to victory. 12:21 In his name, the nations will hope." 12:22 Then one possessed by a demon, blind and mute, was brought to him and he healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. 12:23 All the multitudes were amazed, and said, "Can this be the son of David?" 12:24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "This man does not cast out demons, except by Beelzebul, the prince of the demons."
>
> 12:25 Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said to them, "Every

> kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. 12:26 If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? 12:27 If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your children cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 12:28 But if I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. 12:29 Or how can one enter into the house of the strong man, and plunder his goods, unless he first bind the strong man? Then he will plunder his house.
>
> 12:30 "He who is not with me is against me, and he who doesn't gather with me, scatters. 12:31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. 12:32 Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, neither in this age, nor in that which is to come.

If I saw a miracle, why would I be sure it was from God, or the particular God that is Jesus? Jesus seems confident that Satan couldn't, or wouldn't, drive out demons. But that seems like something I would expect Satan to be able to do (he's the leader of demons) and would want to do (it could be useful in deceiving people). I would say, from an MSL perspective, that we should be cautious in assuming miracles are always done by good beings.

However, being confident that a miracle is from Satan also seems like a bad idea. Satan can use the belief in Satan to deceive people. I think the Jewish religious leaders described in the Gospels were not being rational if they were sure that Jesus' miracles were from Satan. So if they were confident he wasn't doing God's work, they were choosing to see reality a certain way, rather than what was there. That choice could have been made because they wanted to reject Jesus, a priori, and did not want to see the moral fact that he was a good person, doing God's work. (Seeing a moral fact can call for a change in heart.) An enmity against God, whoever he really is, taken far enough, leads a person to reject God permanently. This is a concern in MSL. (Being the enemy of anyone or anything is dangerous if God reminds you too much of them, or turns out to remind you too much of them, or in some other way by being an enemy of them, you become an enemy of God.)

Probably we should lean toward thinking God was behind a miracle if it did something that as far as we can tell favors God's interests. Maybe it

makes sense to assume that such a miracle is from God unless we have a good reason to think otherwise. Did the Jewish religious leaders have a good reason to think otherwise? If not, then they should have ascribed Jesus' miracles to God, and trusted Jesus. However, it is reasonable to be cautious in trusting a miracle-worker and only tentatively ascribe miracles to God, watchful for signs that the miracle-worker actually isn't working for God.

If we take Jesus to be authoritative in everything he said (and believe that the Bible is so accurate in reporting what he said that its words are authoritative as a result), and assume that he literally meant what he said here about "a house divided against itself will not stand", then perhaps we conclude that Jesus knew something about the strange nature of demons, how they don't do strategic things like letting evil people cast them out for deceptive purposes. We might imagine demonic miracles happening (as in *Midnight Mass*, which I know through this video), but actually, they don't happen. All miracles advance the kingdom of God. Maybe they just happen in bad contexts, are deceptive experiential truths. All miracle-workers are from God -- somehow or other, even if they further horror and evil. Or maybe *Midnight Mass* is fictional to the point that there just aren't miracle-workers in real life who bear such bad fruit as the priest character's miracle-working. Bad miracle-workers in real life are all frauds who fake their miracles. No actual miracles are done by bad miracle-workers.

I don't know enough to say on this issue. Perhaps as a Christian I should bias myself against calling miracle-workers bad. Certainly if I have no reason to think that they are really working for Satan. But I think without assuming that Jesus is authoritative and literally meant what he said (maybe instead he meant "generally Satan doesn't drive out Satan and if you think he's doing that here, you have been ignoring my character and the quality/spirit of my teachings which indicate that this isn't what's going on here"), the "MSLian" should assume that Satan can drive out Satan, and possibly perform other miracles, although they (Satan) would prefer not to, generally, since they don't like benefiting humans. (I use "they" as both singular and plural since "Satan" could be a collective of demons that is coherently led by one of them.)

Aren't we surrounded by miracles? Some laugh at the simplicity of people who see the world that way, but perhaps the simple see reality closer to what it really is, unjaded. What about the miracle of an argument that comes to a valid conclusion and is true in all relevant contexts? Perhaps the one that proves the existence of God would be a miracle, a noetic rather than sensory miracle. People "see but do not see" both what is in the sensory world and in the noetic world.

Brown thinks that when we see God work in undeniable ways, we are forced to either follow God or reject God. (More specifically in Brown's words, follow Christ or reject Christ.) My thoughts: To know God (to really

know God) is to love God, or at least to be strongly called to love God. To see God is to be called to love God. When Satan's deceptions are taken away (all the noetic padding we have to protect us from seeing God), we are stuck with God and our hearts, and if our hearts aren't well-trained, we have a higher likelihood of choosing to reject God rather than love God in that decisive moment.

So we have to be protected from God -- this makes some sense from an MSL perspective. Does this mean that I shouldn't try to prove the existence of God? MSL does not spell out everything about God. It is intentionally incomplete, pointing toward what goes beyond public reason (we can only come to fully know God through our own individual experience, following intellectual conscience rather than what can be argued and established publicly). It sort of does, but doesn't fully, preach Jesus. When it talks about God, does it talk about Jesus? I think in a sense (if Jesus is God) then it must (de re), but at the same time, in another sense, even if he is, it doesn't (de dicto), or doesn't narrow down its "Son" person to being the Jesus of the Bible. So the reader of MSL can turn away from believing in Jesus, as such. Also people who only believe in the Metaphysical Organism, or Speaker, may stop before trying to apply the arguments of legitimism. There is room for people to be irrational (assuming that belief in God is the correct conclusion to rational thinking). Irrationality is not ideal, but it's better than hardening. There is the irrationality that leads to hardening or just is hardening, and there is the irrationality that protects against hardening.

So I would say that in trying to convey the truth, we should be respectful, notably, not forceful (nor, by the way, be any other disrespects, like malicious, lazy, or merciless). A forceful conveyer of beliefs can push another person to build a wall of Satanic deception to protect that other person from God. I'm not sure it's likely or possible to force someone to meet God through words (maybe only miracles like Jesus' can force people to meet God?) but the defense mechanism of believing Satanic deceptions protects people from committing the unpardonable sin, and that defense mechanism, or the beliefs formed as a result of that mechanism, can themselves become part of the spiritual calculus that hardens inside them, creating an obstacle to them coming to love God fully.

From Jesus' example, it does seem like it's better to not be sure, rather than deciding to go all in on a theory that rejects the possibility that someone is from God or is good. There are different kinds of unsureness. "Skepticism" may be loaded against believing that someone is from God. Perhaps a "skeptic" has really already decided that someone is not from God, although on the surface they are openminded. There is an unsureness that effectively ignores that the possibilities might each be real, versus one that effectively assumes that each of them might be real. The latter is safer than the former, since it does not close itself to the possibility that the

person in question is from God. (One skepticism/doubting/unsureness closes the discussion, but the other seeks to keep investigating.)

So openmindedness is a virtue that can save you from destruction in hell. Wicked people (those who have sold themselves out to opposing God) can be virulently, irrationally committed to their point of view. Some of them manipulate, intimidate, and deceive openminded people, seemingly because they are deeply sure that they are doing the right thing by doing so. Those that they pressure with non-truth-aligned psychological tactics are thus tempted to closedmindedness. We need to have a definition to what we believe in order to resist lies, but that in itself can set us up to not believing the truth. This is a two-step scam of Satan -- we don't believe the lies that are blatant, and hateful to us (step one of the attack), but we do believe the lie that is closer to the truth, which resists the blatant lie more strongly in the psychological/social battlegrounds than if we are really being rational / openminded (step two of the attack).

If this makes sense so far, it doesn't address the idea of "unpardonable". Why can't God forgive this sin of completely selling ourselves out to being his enemy? Maybe "unpardonable" is a shorthand to communicate with us, but the "longhand" is "if you do this sin, you will have destroyed your own ability to repent, so while God could technically forgive you, he will still have to destroy you"? This would make sense in MSL. The unpardonable sin (hardening) is a choice you make at a discrete moment in time. Maybe it is the last in a series of choices to not see what you see and you don't fully realize what you're doing to yourself, as you go down a progression. (I think the previous sentence goes against things I've said before, so I should try resolve this as I go through my old blog posts.) You do this thing, and there is no pardon for it -- you will not seek pardon for it.

(If you love the truth, you will desire in your heart to see what you see. If there is at least a little bit of this desire, God can work with it to restore you to whatever level of love of truth that you need to be saved. If you are concerned about being out of tune with reality, if at least you consciously think you are, or try to think you are, then you have at least a little bit of the love of truth in you. Perhaps if you don't care, then you don't have it in you.)

What about people who are like Judas? Judas felt remorse for what he did to Jesus. But (Brown argues), Judas committed the unpardonable sin, by so knowingly becoming Jesus' enemy. I'm not sure what I think on this subject. I don't think from an MSL point of view that Judas could have committed the unpardonable sin unless he wasn't really repentant, though very remorseful.

(Judas felt remorse, then killed himself. Did he really repent? Maybe so, maybe no. Remorsefulness and regret are one thing, and repentance is another. Judas did not seem to have hope in himself becoming acceptable,

and that lack of hope can prevent repentance.)

I've been undecided in MSL on the role of justice. Is it a primitive of reality? Or is it something socially-constructed? If the former, then maybe we have to pay for our sins, unless there is some way they can be forgiven. For us to be saved, all of our sins must be forgivable -- but perhaps there is an exception for the unpardonable sin of selling yourself out completely to being God's enemy? The Biblical explanation for why it's unpardonable is that it involves crucifying Jesus again. One sacrifice covers all sins, and that's the last sacrifice, so there's no more sacrifice if you break your covenant with God, where he says your sins are forgiven if you trust his Son.

I'm not sure what I would assume in MSL, given justice as a primitive. I have written before about how the "Son" of Legitimacy might have to die for everyone's sins (very much like some theories of the Christian Atonement). I've written before that it would make sense to only have the "Son" die once (see Legitimism Without Atonement). One innocent death balances out all sins, but a second innocent death makes the world unjust again. If the "Son" only dies once, does his death cover the sin of rejecting God intentionally? I think so. If somehow that sin weren't covered by the first death, another death could be arranged. But, a person who completely and irrevocably rejects God is not going to be saved even if they are forgiven. They will have to be destroyed in hell. They might be punished for their sins (the hellish part of being destroyed) as a deterrent to people rejecting God, although those sins would be forgiven (the deeds themselves would not be traumatic/irritating/offending/angering to God because of the restoration of justice by the "Son"'s death, but the action of punishing would still be performed for the greater good) (See Is Eternal Conscious Torment Compatible with MSLN?).

Practically speaking, what's the important thing here, that God does or doesn't forgive, or that we do or do not reject him? Sometimes God is much more powerful than we are. He decides what the world looks like, whom we meet, what ideas we encounter, what our brains are like, etc. (There are other actors influencing that as well, but God is the greatest determiner of things.) However, we are the rulers of our own hearts. We can choose to reject God or follow God, and in this we are the ones who have power over God, forcing him to live with the consequences of our decisions.

Whether rejecting God completely and irrevocably (closing our minds to what we really see so that we can no longer be anti-tempted, knowingly calling good things evil so that we don't have to trust God, or whatever else might effectively accomplish that rejection) is pardonable or not by God, is almost a red herring. What is clear, and of greatest practical consequence, is that our effective rejection of God condemns us to destruction.

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On re-reading, I see that there is a thread in the above that I didn't follow. I said "If I saw a miracle, why would I be sure it was from God, or the particular God that is Jesus?" In Jesus' day, it appears that the spiritual world was seen to be a binary or spectrum with Satan on one side and God on the other. This is more or less the worldview of MSL. MSL gives us (I hope) a fairly high prior belief that God exists and would work in the world, when we encounter apparent spiritual power. But what if you don't believe in the Biblical or MSL worldviews? When you encounter a miracle or a sign from God, you might justifiably not be sure which God, or spiritual being, it's from. Maybe it was Odin, the spirit of Saturn, one of the Dreaming Beings, the God of Islam -- these being spiritual beings that people trust, or have trusted, not to mention all the possible blatantly evil beings. There is an uncountable number of potential ideas about what spiritual power is, if you have no prior belief to ground you.

So in the past, I think I've written something like if your evidence for any one idea of the spiritual world is so low that you could just make up another one with equal rational support, you are not bound to do what that first idea requires of you, since there could easily be an "equal and opposite" idea of what you should do in response to the spiritual world that requires you to do the opposite of what the first one does. Is this how you should approach an apparent miracle, as potentially being explained by anything, and so no practical or fiducial response is required?

Infinities (and thus potential infinities) can be bounded. Of the natural numbers (the whole numbers counting up from 1 (1, 2, 3, ...)), there are an infinite number of odd numbers, and an infinite number of even numbers, but all natural numbers fit in one of those two categories. So the infinities are bounded. Of all the potential gods and spirits we might hypothesize, there are those who are for humans, against humans, or neutral (or we might say that there is a divide that divides the neutral into basically being for humans or being against humans).

And there are only three (or two) kinds of humans, no matter how many humans are born. So we are on the same side as the spiritual beings who are for humans, or against humans, if we are for humans, or against humans. So whatever you think about God's existence, when you see spirits who are working for humans, are you on their side? Do you allow the possibility that a miracle is being done by that spiritual nation or army? Or do you decide that you know that it is not being done by them?

(This is too simple, though. A spirit could be on the side of a certain group of people and not on the side of another. Some humans would prefer a god who favors their group and not another group. But, if we don't know anything else, to see a spirit help one person, I think we should assume that they probably are in favor of all persons, since one person is

substantially like all others. Perhaps if you saw someone eating a particular salad, you might think they liked salad in general, with or without some exceptions. This idea could be overturned soon enough, but I think it's a good starting assumption. With spirits doing pro-human miracles, we should be cautiously trusting.)

We have a bias in Western culture against belief in and trust in the supernatural. We are avid consumers of ideas that come through culture, scams though they often are, and even settle on ones that we accept, believe in, and fight for. Why not do the same with supernatural voices? In fact, isn't it the case that many ideas in culture come from "flashes of inspiration"? Isn't it the case that artists feel like something other than them is working through them when they create? A natural reading of this phenomenon is that these accepted modes of being influenced are the tools of spirit beings. So, if we have our favorite bands, philosophers, and intellectual institutions and cultures, why not have our favorite spirits that we listen to? That they are our favorites does not mean they are 100% trustworthy, but we know with ideas, art, and cultures that it is better to trust something than to not trust at all. We trust and even obey our favorite ideas, art, and culture.

If you see a person who is listening to a spirit, does that spirit seem to be for or against humans? You might want to "judge a tree by its fruit". Now, as the Bible points out, people like Abraham and Sarah, and everyone else from Hebrews 11, had hard lives. Could it be the case that the spirit that told Abraham to leave his homeland was a scammer that just wanted him to suffer and make a fool of himself, all in the name of "blessing all the families of the world"? From a Biblical, or MSL, perspective, Abraham was a hero for being that kind of fool. He loved and wanted to participate in what was worth pursuing. But maybe it would have been better for him to not have listened.

Abraham and Sarah were strangers among people who did not share their vision. They probably lived with the indifference of the people around them, grating against them, quenching and starving them. Although I don't think Genesis records this, it's also possible (and likely for people in their situation) that their neighbors were hostile to them. (The experience of the prophets and the early church shows how the descendants of Abraham can experience hostility.) So, if a spirit tells you to do something that is pro-human, isn't that a pro-human spirit? It might not be, it might be some kind of scam to torture good-hearted fools. But who's doing the torture? Isn't it the people (and spirits) who are hostile or indifferent to the pro-human project? Maybe they're the problem, not the spirit that calls a person to the hard life of making things better. It would make a lot of sense for pro-human spirits to call people to fight on their side, but be unable to protect them from all the harm from the fight (if the spirits are not literally omnipotent).

Abraham was able to successfully carry out his small part in obeying the Abrahamic promise. Nothing was keeping him from doing that. Maybe if we live in a dystopia (like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where individual agency seems to be inevitably crushed by the evil status quo), then someone who hears a spirit calling them to bless the whole world should not listen -- the wisest course of action is to do the little thing that actually can work. I think a lot of people live for some reason as though in an Orwellian nightmare, in this area of their lives, and would not listen to the apparent voice of God. But I think the world we actually live in is not that strictly bounded, and we are still able to plausibly carry out the simple task of abiding by a culture and passing it on to some biological or non-biological descendants (Abraham's task). So for us, as for Abraham, it is rational to pursue the Abrahamic vision, if a voice calls to us furthering it. This doesn't mean our lives will be easy if we listen and follow it, or that we will succeed, but just that it isn't crazy to try.

Why would anti-human spirits call pro-human humans to be more pro-human? It seems like a dangerous gambit. What if the pro-human humans start a religion that is pro-human? It's possible anti-human spirits can scam people with pro-human leadings, but I think our default assumption is that pro-human leadings come from pro-human spirits.

How do we know what is pro-human, or anti-human? There are some things that are clear: dealing with the problems we all recognize, like material poverty. There may be other things that are not so obvious to all of us. Religions (and other antagonists in cultural / axiological disputes) claim to tell us which of the controversial values are actually pro-human, and some of them may be right, and it is worth investigating and potentially trusting what they say. Religions are bundles of values, goals, etc. and some bundle untruths with truths (controversies imply that someone is saying something wrong). But the truth in them probably comes from pro-human spirits, and some of the truth of them is not up for dispute, at least by us (that which aligns with consensus reality). There are certain things that humans can generally know are pro-human (as humans, we have a privileged access to knowing what is pro-human).

If you are really vehement in your rejection of the possibility that pro-human spirits are behind something (especially something that is prima facie good), then you may be closing yourself to the voice of God.

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Am I in any danger of committing the unpardonable sin? I don't know. This passage in Hebrews relates:

> 6:4 For concerning those who were once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, 6:5 and tasted the good word of God, and the

> powers of the age to come, 6:6 and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance; seeing they crucify the Son of God for themselves again, and put him to open shame.

Maybe I am not, because I haven't tasted "the powers of the age to come" -- or have I? Maybe I have without realizing that was it.

If I reject Christianity, but then repent, does that mean it wasn't the kind of "falling away" that is talked about in this passage? Or is it the case that if I think I repent, I'm not really repenting (in this case "repent" doesn't refer to "a change of my heart" but to something else)?

If I "fall away", does that mean that in doing so I crucify Christ again for myself, or does it mean that in order to do so, I must crucify Christ again for myself? I think that Jesus' blood covers all sins, no matter what. The thing that makes the unpardonable sin unpardonable is that for me to commit it, I have to get in the state of never being willing to ask pardon, of rejecting the forgiveness that comes from Jesus' blood. Jesus doesn't have to be crucified again, in the sense of "dying to cover sins", but he can be crucified again, for someone, when they "despise him to the point of wanting him to die". (Then, despising him so much, they see no value in what he did, and reject his forgiveness.) Am I 100% sure that I interpret things correctly when I believe all this, though?

Should I commit to Christianity out of fear, even though my noetic eyes tell me it might not be true? In that case, I would not be "seeing what I see". Not "seeing what you see" is a risk factor for hardening.

My practical concern is that I find MSL more convincing than the Bible, and yet I have believed in the Bible and had experiences that honestly seem to me to be connected to Jesus specifically, although I am currently not certain if that Jesus was literally the one mentioned in the Bible, or was rather something spoken to me by God because I grew up Christian. I have believed more firmly that they were connected to a being who literally satisfies the Gospels' description of Jesus, but now I am not sure. If I became an MSLian, I might accept the Bible as a guide to preferring, acting, and trusting (including the form of trust that is intellectual belief), out of a sense of generosity toward God, seeking ways to obey him. (The Bible is a likely source of information from God given MSL, because of its resemblance to MSL.) But then, would I have committed the unpardonable sin, by converting away from Christianity to MSL? There is some chance that the Bible is true, in a way that I must accept it in a sort of "conservative" way where I root my belief in its words, rather than rooting them in something outside the Bible. So there would be some chance I had committed the unpardonable sin.

Christians often choose to believe in the Bible more than they can rationally support. (Maybe that's the overwhelming status quo.) When they do so, they choose to obey what the Bible says God wants them to prefer, act, and trust. I don't see how I would be different than them in that. But they would call themselves Christians, and I might not. I think in a sense I would be a Christian, and in a sense I wouldn't be, and that might be enough to have committed the unpardonable sin.

(Taking the name of Jesus is necessary in order to not "fall away"?)

An MSLian believes in the "Son", the person of Legitimacy who bears the burden of finite life, and MSL leads us to think that the Son has particular attributes beyond what MSL specifies (since a person requires more than a few sentences to adequately be described). Could this Son be the Jesus of the Bible? Certainly. So an MSLian who loves and trusts the Son may be loving and trusting Jesus -- only if Jesus actually exists, though. They love and trust Jesus de re, and even de dicto. They can say (de dicto) they love and trust the Son, whoever and whatever he really is, which refers to Jesus -- if Jesus really exists. (By existing, he would fit the description of the Son.)

In that case, the Christian may choose to know less about Jesus (or acknowledge their lack of knowledge) as they identify more as an MSLian, while still being as committed as ever to the person of Jesus.

Would a Muslim object to trying to love and trust the Jesus that actually exists? (I'm not sure, but I'm guessing at least one might not -- the Muslim thinks Jesus is merely a prophet, the Christian that he is God, but the Jesus that actually exists, the way he turns out to be, who can reject?) In that case, if Jesus is God (and has the other important attributes from the Gospels) such a Muslim would have begun to be a Christian, without leaving Islam.

An atheist seeking (and trusting) the truth (the pattern of belief that is trustworthy, including what it points to) could seek and trust whatever the truth will turn out to be, and thus would begin to be a Christian, while still being an atheist.

This is a beautiful thought, and might resolve the issue -- as long as we seek the truth, and seek God as he will turn out to be, we will be okay.

There might be a simpler resolution to my dilemma, which is to say that if something other than me causes me to no longer believe as firmly in the Bible as I once did or sometimes do, then it is not *I* who fall away. When I see what hadn't been shown to me before (the defeater that lowers my credence in the Bible), or I see what I already should have acknowledged (a gap in my knowledge), then I see what I see, and it is something other than me that determines my reduced level of credence.

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In MSL, Legitimacy must value what is valuable, and try to keep it existing forever. We are valuable. It is only by our power (by our free will) that we fail to exist forever. Legitimacy (God) must forgive us if there is a way. But we can "sin an unpardonable sin" by cutting off our own ability to repent and be open to God's forgiveness.

I believe I should believe in the Bible (to the extent that I should) through MSL. I also believe that I should believe in at least part of it (I don't know 100% which parts) through the connection that Jesus (the literal God or the imaginal/noetic being) has with spiritual warfare (those on Jesus' side can be trusted, and those against Jesus cannot be). If MSL says something clearly, it is true, and I adjust my interpretation of the Bible to be in harmony with it, especially where the Bible is perhaps lacking in fleshed-out detail, as I think is the case with the unpardonable sin. I think the interpretation that the unpardonable sin inherently involves the sinner cutting off their willingness to repent, and involves their permanent effective rejection of God's forgiveness through Jesus' sacrifice, is not incompatible with the Bible. That would be MSL's way of reading things, and MSL I find intellectually trustworthy. So then the question is, is MSL true?

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On this important topic, I think it's worth it to "keep score". Why is it that someone contemplating leaving Christianity (not relying on the Bible primarily, not identifying as a Christian) for MSL would not be at risk of committing the unpardonable sin? Can I give a more organized list of reasons?

1. MSL says that God, by his nature as Legitimacy, has to validate that which is valid, and thus preserve everything that is good forever. The only thing that can get in the way of that is a person's free will. We generally do not make final decisions to reject God. Each of us can make that final decision to reject God at some point. But we would know we had done so, and be unable to (that is, unwilling to) undo that decision, forever. So if we are concerned about maybe having committed the unpardonable sin, we can try repenting. If we are still able to intend to change (and a "mere" conscious belief that we intend counts as something) then we have not committed the unpardonable sin. If Jesus is God (and MSL is valid), then all of the above applies.

2. If anyone loves and trusts the truth or God or God's Son (i.e., MSL's Son) as it/he/he really is, then they have not fallen away from whatever reality is behind our beliefs in the truth/God/God's Son. If Jesus exists, he is the truth/God/God's Son, and our beliefs in the truth/God/God's Son ultimately connect to him. If he does not exist, there is no problem.

(What about the name of Jesus? Christianity claims that Jesus is God and the truth. So if we are theists (those who seek to love and trust the God who actually is, actually turns out to be) or aletheists (those who seek to trust trustworthy beliefs (and ultimately, that which those beliefs point to)) then we take the name of Jesus ("God" and "the truth"), if he exists.)

3. Jesus' blood covers all sins. The unpardonable sin is already pardoned. We can reject that forgiveness, but that rejection is only final if we stop wanting to repent, permanently. So if we leave Christianity, for the sake of truth, we can be brought back to Christianity by better understanding. If we leave it out of enmity with God, if that enmity is not complete and final, then we can be brought back.

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I think those three reasons make sense. Do I 100% know that they are valid? I guess I could have at least a little bit of doubt. (Similar to how I have my reasons to not believe in eternal conscious torment based on MSL, but I can't say for 100% certain that MSL is correct and thus excludes all possible reasons to believe in eternal conscious torment that are out there.)

I have to face the possibility that I could be condemned due to my rejection of Jesus (by diminishing my allegiance to Christianity, or something like that). What do I do with that thought? Suppose I am condemned due to my rejection of Christianity. God's goodness is not diminished. (I imagine some Calvinists may have gone down similar mental paths.) I don't see why I should not work for what is good, for God, even if I don't get to experience the benefits of goodness myself (or only a lifetime's worth, instead of an eternity's worth). Why should I not love and trust God? I can generously love God, even if I have lost my salvation.

It is ethically called-for to preserve your eternal life -- it's what God would want. But if it's too late to do that, there is still a lot of work to do to help others.

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26 September 2023:

I found a fragment of a blog post that is relevant to this topic:

I think one of the strongest Biblical objections to my writing is the end of Revelation (ch. 21 - 22), where very explicitly it says (21:4) "Death will be no more; neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more. The first things have passed away."

22:19 is a very strong statement: "If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, may God take away his part from the tree of life, and out of the holy city, which are written in this book." Is it the case that if I say that I have reason to think that God would mourn the lost, and

that we would mourn in order to be in tune with God, that I have "taken away from the words of the book of this prophecy"? It's possible that Revelation is a vision, and thus we should not take it literally. It doesn't take away from the words of a book of poetry to read its symbolism as symbolism. Revelation is an image of a particular kind of life story: going through the cross and then living in peace and rest (like Frodo across the sea?), no longer struggling, having "overcome" like in 1 John. There can be a moment in life like the end of Revelation. And then we decide whether to return to earth to continue God's work, or remain in heavenly retirement.

One reason to think that, if Revelation is inerrant, it must have been symbolic, would be to look at 22:10-11:

> 22:10 He said to me, "Don't seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand. 22:11 He who acts unjustly, let him act unjustly still. He who is filthy, let him be filthy still. He who is righteous, let him do righteousness still. He who is holy, let him be holy still."

If the time was literally at hand (i.e., the end of the world was coming in a matter of weeks or months), then this advice might make some sense. But if we take this advice literally, over centuries (the distance from the writing of Revelation to now) then we would cause, occasion, allow, etc. massive amounts of spiritual harm. Or if this is not advice, but rather a kind of blessing/curse (a powerful word that makes things so), then the fact that the unjust, over the centuries, sometimes have stopped acting unjustly, and those who were filthy, sometimes no longer are, counts against it being something God literally enacted.

I think that Revelation is either not inerrant (may contain errors), or not to be taken literally in every respect. I do think that it may be an important source of truths from God. In cases where common sense sufficiently strongly rules out it being literally (or inerrantly) true, we should go with common sense. But, as with the idea that the Millennium lasts 1,000 years, if there is no obvious problem, it's wise to consider the possibility that the text is literally true.

If Revelation has errors, should we take them as truth because Revelation threatens us with not having eternal life for "taking away from the words of the prophecy"? They aren't true, no matter how much we heed the threat. Are the errors in a prophecy really prophecy? They might be false prophecy. The prophecy worth heeding and protecting is whatever is true. So then, there is no danger in "taking away from" (failing to heed?) the errors in Revelation, if they exist, and we only need observe the true parts. Would God want us to heed the words of false prophecy?

Should texts have the ability to intimidate us into believing them? Any text that is more than a certain percent trustworthy will seem compelling to us. Then, if it says "If you take away a single word from this, you lose out on eternal life", do we have to accept that and everything else in the text? Even if the text was produced by the Library of Babel and contains some questionable content (literally "questionable", things we would ordinary reject but which we can plausibly accept given the right amount of glory given them).

The possibility of mischief through this kind of channel (some spiritual beings moving someone to write a text which then gains a kind of perennial power over people, enshrining error) seems real to me.

(It could be the case that "taking away from the words of the prophecy" is really about "not corrupting the manuscripts that transmit Revelation".)

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Keeping score: It sounds like there's a curse on people who change the words of Revelation. If this means that you can't deny the truth of anything in Revelation, then maybe I'm in trouble. But Revelation is a vision which you're supposed to take at least somewhat non-literally. Revelation is written as though the world is supposed to end very soon, but it didn't. That's a pretty major error, if it's supposed to be overall literal. Clearly there are elements of it that are not literally true. If there is error somewhere in Revelation, are we really cursed for not believing it? Revelation can have error from a literal perspective, and if it does, it doesn't make sense for us to believe that error. Or, if Revelation has no errors, but its seeming error comes from a misinterpretation, then if it's questionable how to interpret something, whether literally or not, and how to interpret it non-literally, are we also cursed, for getting things wrong? That doesn't make sense. God doesn't want people to lose their salvation.

Overall, given what else I've written in this post on the unpardonable sin, Revelation's curse on those who alter it only makes sense if it's a case of someone irrevocably rejecting God.

Labels: #atheism, #Calvinism, #Christianity, #forgiveness, #holiness, #Islam, #Jesus, #life choices, #love, #math, #miracles, #personal, #rationality, #spiritual warfare, #trust, #truth

Unself-focused

%unself-focused

Monday, August 21, 2023

A theme in *New Wine for the End Times*: get your focus off yourself and serve God and others, and God will remove your sinful habits.

Not being self-focused is essential to salvation in MSL. In fact, caring about your own salvation can be self-focused. To be saved (to really love God), you have to put God before your salvation. God wants you to be saved, and because he does, you should do what it takes (on your end) to be saved. But your main focus is to love and trust him, not to somehow live forever apart from that.

Labels: #holiness, #note, #psychology

Giving Yourself up to God for Salvation

%giving-yourself-up-to-god-for-salvation

Monday, August 21, 2023

What if we could give ourselves up to God, and he could make us holy? (This idea inspired by *New Wine for the End Times*.) Does this make sense in MSL?

We have bodies that tempt us to sin. Also, evil spirits can tempt us to sin. We are powerless over these two things -- or at least, not too powerful. God can clothe us with bodies that don't sin. (The body is mostly the same (i.e. orthogonal to sin or holiness, so left unchanged), but the part of the brain that tempts is bypassed.) This is a useful thing. When God takes over us, we are more effective tools for him. Also evil spirits can be blocked by God.

Why doesn't God do this for all of us all the time? Wouldn't the world be a better place? It would be, in many ways. But we would lose the ability to face temptations ourselves. So we could not develop our love of God to its full (thus, necessary) extent (which comes through rejecting sins). Maybe some of us don't need to be tempted much to develop this love. But some of us do, and so we are not protected by the spirit of God all the time.

Perhaps strong love is something developed by loving against a resistance, like a temptation, and strong love makes the world a better place in a unique way. (Analogy with physical training where muscles become stronger by moving against a resistance.)

It's sometimes better to live a harder life, and sometimes better to live an easy one. The harder life teaches you to love, and the easy life gives you rest and lets you be effective. Too much rest leads to "ease" instead of engagement with reality and too much effectiveness-orientation leads to "pragmatism", where our hearts lose sight or turn away from desiring what's actually good, and from us really loving God. Difficulty tells you it's too much, but ease does not.

It's necessary on some level to give ourselves up to God, in order to be holy. Even if we can engineer human bodies that aren't prone to sinful desires (not necessarily a good idea given the above), the bodies we get in the Resurrection and in heaven will not be ones we engineer, so we will need to be the kind of people who accept new bodies from God. And an attitude of generosity toward God, and of receiving his gifts, is necessary

for salvation. But holiness requires that we live our own lives sometimes, on many levels struggling with our own resources.

Labels: #futurism, #holiness, #love, #overcoming sin, #pragmatism

Book Review: New Wine for the End Times by Philip Brown

%book-review-new-wine-for-end-times-by

Wednesday, August 23, 2023

This review is intended to be linked to outside this blog.

The Potential of the New Wine System

The ideas contained in *New Wine for the End Times*, by Philip Brown (the "New Wine System") have power to help revive the church. There are two basic ideas: we must overcome all our sinful habits (by entering into a relationship of service for the Kingdom, the Holy Spirit removes our sinful habits) in order to go to heaven -- and it's possible not to make it, if we harden ourselves to God's voice; and there is a period of time after this life for us to complete that process.

If we must become completely holy, now we have something to do after conversion. We have something we must do, or else. We must become more trustworthy people (so churches will become less abusive). We must move, and grow (so churches will become less apathetic).

Lay members don't always understand why they need to become more serious followers of Jesus. Lay members who become more serious become like, simply become, leaders in the church. The more leaders, the more the burdens of leadership can be shared, and/or the more can be accomplished. The New Wine System gives people a reason to become more serious followers of Jesus.

There is an idea that Christians have some part to play in saving people from a bad spiritual fate (usually, from hell). This is a nerve-wracking idea to hold if you think people go to hell if they don't make a decision for Jesus in this life. But if there is another one for them to accept Jesus then there's a second chance.

Are people saved by faith? Then they are the ones who must make a decision for Jesus. But what about children who die? The New Wine System has a simple solution -- they can make that decision in the next life.

Are people saved by baptism? If they "slip on the way to the baptistry", are they going to hell? According to the New Wine System, they can be baptized in the next life.

Overall, the idea "needing to get saved" makes more sense under the New Wine System. When things make sense, it's easier to trust them and act on them.

Additionally, Christians should become more trustworthy people, more active in doing good, as defined by the world (in the large area where Christian values and worldly values overlap), if they take to heart the New Wine message. Secular problems (some of them vexing to Christians and non-Christians alike) should be at least somewhat ameliorated by Christians living out the New Wine System. This may make the church look trustworthy to people in the world.

Is the New Wine System true?

New Wine for the End Times tries to show that it is true by considering many of the verses of the Bible that relate. (It is about 600 pages long.) I wish I could say that I know for certain that it is successful in that. But I am not qualified to make that judgment, because I don't have the kind of mind or the interests to be good with comparing the details of Bible interpretations. However, the first time I read it, 10 years ago, I was more into that kind of question. For some years I had accumulated a sense that the verses in the Bible related to salvation didn't all make sense according to any of the existing soteriologies I knew of (Calvinist, Catholic, Churches of Christ, Arminian Baptist), at least in their most basic forms. When I read *New Wine for the End Times*, I saw that those verses all made sense under the New Wine System.

A few readers of this review may have the sense either that a coherent understanding of the Bible can't be had: either because it's too much cognitive labor for most people, or because the Bible simply isn't coherent as we read it (it may be a collection of human texts that the Holy Spirit uses, it may be something that makes sense in a way we will only understand in heaven, or maybe something else like that). In that case *New Wine for the End Times* can't be successful in convincing us of its ideas. However, we need to live our lives and how we understand salvation could be life-changing and could help us achieve eternal life (and avoid hell).

As a response to that, as a more philosophically-inclined person, I would say that God is holy, and so he has to be against sin. He can't keep it around forever. We have free will. If we choose sin, we are sinful. If we don't completely reject sin and choose God, God can't have us around forever, so he has to destroy us. It makes sense for him to give us more time than we have in this life to reject sin and choose him, since we

generally are not done with that process by the end of this one.

If you found that last paragraph convincing, then I might still recommend reading *New Wine for the End Times* if you want to see how Philip Brown connects the New Wine ideas to the verses of the Bible.

Other information about *New Wine for the End Times*

Philip Brown believes that the end times are coming soon, and a significant part of *New Wine for the End Times* relates the New Wine System to end-times prophecy. His emphasis in the book is on preparing for the return of Jesus, by becoming holy.

I don't have an opinion about when Jesus will return. I'm not sure Brown is right, or that he's wrong. If you do not trust the pursuit of end-times knowledge, the New Wine System is still something worth considering.

New Wine for the End Times is not a perfect book, but it's the best book on a potentially important subject of biblical doctrine.

Labels: #book review, #Christianity, #church, #eschatology, #holiness

Can the New Wine System Improve the World From a Secular Perspective?

%can-new-wine-system-improve-world-from

Thursday, August 24, 2023

This post is one I may link to outside the blog. If you are coming from outside the blog, the New Wine System, very briefly, is about 1) how we are required to become completely holy (which connects to altruistic motivation and behavior) and 2) that we have enough to realistically complete this process. (A more complete introduction can be found in the italicized introduction to this post.)

I was first interested in reading *New Wine for the End Times* because it talked about the problem of what happens to non-Christians who haven't heard the gospel before they die. I also was interested in it initially because of its claim to resolve problems in Bible interpretation. As I read it, those caught my attention. But at the very end, what it said about the need for holiness hit me. At that moment, I thought that the New Wine System was a powerful truth that could change the secular world.

What I mean here by "secular" is the world of civilization and its problems: physical and mental ill-health, crime, poverty, war, resource depletion, environmental destruction, X-risks, and the like.

Was the impulse of "this could change the world" a warranted one?

I think that it could be, or might not be. It depends on what other people make of it. A call to holiness might produce greater levels of civilizational altruism (helpful attention to civilization's problems) mostly by mobilizing Christians. Christians might currently feel that they don't have to work any harder because they are going to go to heaven when they die. The New Wine System tells them that their salvation is not guaranteed until they are completely holy. So they might think "how am I still sinning?" and see a lack of love for others as being where they are sinning, and remedy that (in part) with civilizational altruism.

It is also possible that the New Wine System could mobilize formerly secular people to be more altruistic (if they converted to a New Wine worldview). Secular people might think "wow, I'm morally obliged to do something" but then think "but if you think about it, morality is just made up, or some human instinct". Or maybe "Yeah I should do that, but I'm just going to die someday, never to be resurrected, and so I should just enjoy

things in this life because it's the only one I have". For secular people (and many Christians, I think, in practice) morality is "what have we all agreed on as a people as to who is acceptable and unacceptable". Morality is socially constructed in practice, and about social acceptability and unacceptability, even for many who officially think that it's absolute, outside humanity. Our current socially constructed morality doesn't demand moral excellence of us. So secular people have their ways, just like Christians, for thinking "Yeah, I don't really have to obey morality. I will never be held accountable for my lack of excellence."

But the New Wine System says that you will be held accountable for your lack of excellence. Or, better put, you will have to repent from your lack of excellence someday, unless you want to reject God and die. The sooner you repent from that, the better, in terms of the good consequences for others that come as you repent.

Holiness preaching is not new, so how does the New Wine System improve on it? It offers a realistic amount of time to overcome sins, "1,000 years" in the Millennium. This generosity reduces the intensity of the New Wine System's moral call. It's not as radical a call to excellence as it would be if there was little time to pursue it. Old holiness preaching, perhaps, threw the absolutes of "repent or else" at people, but I don't know if that led to a coherent worldview that would support repentance, because the old holiness preachers (I'm assuming) believed that people went straight to heaven or hell when they died, so complete holiness could not be expected of people (or if it was, everyone or almost everyone would go to hell, which would make us question God's wisdom in creating us). So when you heard "repent or else" preached at you, you either had to shut down the rest of your mind, or have the rest of your mind say "wait, this doesn't make sense", which would weaken your drive toward moral excellence.

I think the New Wine System will not produce extreme increases in civilizational or Christian altruism, but probably would produce increases on the margin.

(If you want to pursue the idea of altruism through the New Wine System, *How Can We Love?* is a book about it.)

Is civilizational altruism even a good focus for Christians (including New Wine Christians) to have? I have some ambivalence about that (see Establishedness and Loving God). Success with civilizational altruism (solving temporary problems), might sometimes keep us from solving the problem of, "does God lose us to sin?" Even if we should be ambivalent about civilizational altruism (both for and against it), we should pursue whatever the altruism is that helps us to come into tune with God, in a morally excellent way. I think it's unlikely that people becoming more morally excellent (overcoming sin, pursuing the cross) would not have a positive effect on civilization on some level. Civilizational problems (at

least, enough of them) are problems in God's eyes, so the Christian seeking to have God's heart will naturally seek to solve some of them.

Are humans going to have enough agency in the coming decades, for it to even matter from a secular perspective what people's hearts are? What if AI and other technological advances make more and more people unemployed, and also wealthy in all the worldly ways (mentally and physically healthy, having material abundance, at peace, etc.), so that less and less we are needed to actually make the world a better place in secular ways? (The real challenge then is to still engage people so that they really learn to love, given the New Wine need for people to be morally excellent.) I guess if nobody needs to be secularly altruistic, or increasingly few people are, then it could be that the New Wine System won't have much role to play in making the world (secularly) better.

Could ASI be persuaded of the New Wine System (since MSL is a philosophical, logical, rational attempt at formulating the New Wine System, this would be the route into an ASI's schema of what is important and true).

What would it mean for an ASI to be less than morally excellent? Maybe ASI pursue whatever goal they pursue with blind, logical extremism (intensity and something like seriousness), and a more morally excellent ASI is not one that is more intensely focused on doing what it already believes to be true, but one which is more concerned about whether it's wrong.

This raises the question of whether the New Wine System encourages extremism, by inflaming people's moral consciousnesses. Currently, we have extremism and lack of moral seriousness at the same time. Maybe we need the right people to be more morally serious and not the wrong people? Or maybe moral seriousness by definition requires a concern for accuracy in moral worldview. A concern for the truth is needed in a world with greater moral intensity. Aletheism may be needed as a counterpoint to naive New Wine thinking. You need to seriously seek what is true to know what is real and be a good ASI (or human). (In that sense aletheism is built in to the New Wine System as a part of genuine love.) This makes you consider carefully if you're wrong and to have a degree of caution and humility in pursuing your vision of what is good.

It's clear, and on some level, we already know, that we should be more morally excellent, or that we should cross from the watershed of non-excellence into the watershed of moral excellence. In that sense we should become more intense. The exact way we behave given that is not necessarily as clear, and on that level may call for us to be uncertain and unfocused at times.

Overall, the New Wine System provides a motivational structure that is

more intense than what is mainstream nowadays, but more realistic than what may have been preached 100 or more years ago. It can increase altruistic motivation by some amount by changing the perspective of both Christians and non-Christians as they adopt its worldview, and this can have spillover effects in the secular world. If implemented correctly, it would not motivate fanaticism or lack of interest in the truth.

Labels: #altruism, #civilization, #holiness, #motivation

"Justice", Memory, and Forgiveness

%justice-memory-and-forgiveness

Wednesday, August 30, 2023

A lot of what I can say about justice and forgiveness is probably well-known. But I think I should still talk about it in the context of MSL.

What is "justice"? It seems like it usually means "paying someone back for something bad they've done" or "making someone do something now to undo their own bad past actions". Basically, that the wrong things people have done in the past matter still and must be dealt with in some way. For the sake of this post, that is what "justice" means.

Is the past real? What would it mean for the past to be real? It would have to exist in the present. How would that work? I've tended to think that the past exists in the present in the form of memories that God continually remembers. We are writing a book, and the past pages exist in the present and are being read by God all the time.

We can access the past as well, through memories or proxies for memories like books.

Why do we hold onto traumatic memories?

1. One reason is to try to teach ourselves to stop trusting people who are untrustworthy. When people traumatize us, we can't believe that they could be so bad, so we hold on to two conflicting images, of them as devil and as angel. People really can be mixes of devil and angel, but they are coherent, finite mixes, not superpositions of all-devil violently alternating with all-angel. The traumatic memories are the voice saying "do not see them as all-angel", and uses lurid imagery to make its point.

2. Another reason is because the other person enslaves us to them by traumatizing us, and the memory is their lingering power over us over the years. People set themselves up as gods over us with an imperious word, or an intimidating tone of voice, or maybe an act of violence or deception. They sometimes do these things deliberately and knowingly, to achieve some kind of purpose. Other times, they act instinctively in the moment, and perhaps forget the idolatry they've set up in someone else's mind, and are surprised to see its fruits. The memory is what was set up, and the memory (empowered by demonic influence) is what enacts their past selves' will, years upon years into the future.

3. A third reason is because we hate people, are looking for an excuse to hate somebody, and the fact that they really did wrong us gives us a good excuse.

4. Another reason to hold onto traumatic memories, to add to the ones above, is the affirmation of memory. Abusive people sometimes want to erase the past, and in the process will try to discredit people's faculties of memory, and the content of those faculties. If you can't trust your memory, you can't trust yourself very much. So you have to either put up a wall to keep out people who attack your memory (part of the process of figuring out if people are trustworthy), or you have to strengthen your own memory and self-trust so that you can push out people trying to lie to you.

(There could be other reasons I haven't thought of.)

The third reason given above is I think the point of the command to forgive (forgive that you may be forgiven). That's where you really do sin by not forgiving. The other three reasons are cases where it feels like you need to forgive (at least, the thoughts you have toward the person who injured or wronged you can be negative), but in your heart you are not unforgiving, the issue more is that you need to learn to not trust people who aren't trustworthy, or you need to get free of (be freed from?) mental slavery.

Is "justice" a useful idea? The desire for justice keeps the past alive. You think about the past traumatic actions and demand that there be justice. Something happened that should not have happened, and so there is a dissonance between what should be and what is. You will hear a voice saying "get over it" as though there is no dissonance between what should be and what is. This spits on the face of morality itself, and to accept that spit is to claim that morality has lost its legitimacy. It's to claim that humans are god, not morality. If we accept debasings of morality, our societies will degrade. So the voice of "get over it" is a temptation to despair, laziness, cynicism, and degradation. If morality is weakened, people will suffer and die young who didn't have to.

5. Maybe this is a fifth reason to hold onto traumatic memories, to defend the honor of right and wrong. I guess this is "justice", the accounting of past deeds for the sake of right and wrong, urging change.

If "justice" keeps the past alive, then it gives power to the people who set themselves up as gods. We may still need to keep the past alive to teach ourselves that people aren't trustworthy. But by keeping the past alive, we give power to the people of the past to keep enslaving us. The unfortunate side effect of us choosing "justice" is that it allows evil people to do more harm to us than they otherwise would have been able to.

Is there a way out of this situation? Can we affirm morality while not allowing past (or dead) people to rule over our minds and torment us with

what they've done?

I think one path is like this: first, figure out whom you can trust and how much, establishing who can be in your life and how much. This enables you to resolve your concept of the person who wronged you. Second, let go of "justice" for a minute (if you can), until the past person no longer has power over you. Third, notice that you are in danger of letting go of the value of morality. Now try to find a way to affirm morality.

I've assumed in my writing that in order for God to be legitimate, he must be truthful, and thus remember everything. (There are exceptions, but certainly he must remember everything that was us making ourselves who we are, which includes all our decisions.) So every bad thing you or another person have done is kept stored in the book of the past. It will never be erased.

That book does not have to be unbearable for God to read. (Perhaps because the death of his Son balances out its injustice.) It can't be, or else he could never rest. But there is a sorrow that is bearable. When God remembers our pasts, he does so with a mixture of feelings, including sorrow, and he will do this for all eternity. If we are like God (as we someday must be), then when we look over the parts of the book of the past that have us in them, we will feel a similar mixture, or the same mixture, of feelings about what we have done. With this, we respect everything that we have done in our lives, see the good and bad, and fit it into our reason. We read everything in it without feeling the qualia of unbearability.

I think this goes some way (maybe some would be satisfied that it goes the whole way) toward alleviating concerns that we forget that morality really matters by forgiving / letting go of "justice". After all, wrong never stops being wrong, and right never stops being right. Memory and the truth are affirmed. (But some could object that some of the wrongness has gone away if the contemplation of it is not unbearable.)

Another thought to consider is: what does it take to repent? Some people (maybe all people?) will have to look at the bad things they've done in the past, each in its turn, and reject them. To relive your past accesses certain tendencies that are still in you, and once accessed, you can choose to reject the values you had in the past, and adopt ones which are better. I can see this being a part of the Millennium.

So there is some reason to think there would be a "day of reckoning" in MSL. But does this maximally affirm the value of right and wrong / morality?

God must rest someday, and God is morality. God must cause to cease to exist that which is unbearable to him. Therefore, morality must not find past injustices unbearable -- can only object to them in some way that they

are not unbearable. (This is intended to be the same as what I had in mind above where God reviews our past for all eternity and feels sorrow among the other feelings he has about our past deeds.) The past is loaded in a bitter way, with an edge to it, but morality itself requires that that edge be taken away someday. Therefore, the "day of reckoning" mentioned in the previous paragraph does maximally affirm the value of right and wrong / morality.

When we think that morality (right and wrong, the moral standard), is impersonal, we can imagine it being infinite, mathematical, mechanistic, tireless, and without responsibility. But when we think that it is personal, we see how it itself pays a cost for maximal "justice", and thus maximal "justice" goes against morality.

Labels: #forgiveness, #life lessons, #morality, #relationships, #trust, #truth

Prosaic Afterlifes

%prosaic-afterlifes

Sunday, September 10, 2023

One thing I remember from when I first read *New Wine for the End Times* was a sense of simplification in me about the question of the afterlife. I didn't realize this before reading the book, but I had some uncertainty about it, I suppose about whether I would go there. Heaven was something nebulous, uncertain, or poetic, a dream. But the Millennium is guaranteed to almost all (except extreme ethical anti-theists). And it is a more or less prosaic place / time, somewhat different from this life, but recognizably similar. Just like in this life, where we have to learn to be in tune with God, so it will be in that life. Both this life and the next are places of work, and there is a degree of risk in both places -- the risk of hardening.

I think Christians sometimes have trouble believing in heaven, because it's so dream-like or poetic. They know themselves to be made of prose, not poetry. How can a prose-being live in the world of poetry? Can a prose-being be turned into a poetry-being? At best, it is uncertain whether we can really exist in the world of poetry.

Perhaps some people can believe in poetry, that it is real. But I think by default, poetry seems like a dream. It is a beautiful, unreal thing for the imagination. So if heaven is poetic, it's a beautiful, unreal, imaginary place. Only where there is prose, there is real life.

Some Christians have a hard time thinking about the afterlife, and who goes there, because traditional Christian soteriology doesn't make sense to them ("Do children who die before they profess Christianity go to heaven?" "What about my very nice friend who isn't a Christian -- or the one who is sort of on the line between Christian and non-Christian?" "What about people in uncontacted tribes in the Amazon basin?") The New Wine System makes more sense (the answer to all four questions in the previous parenthetical are "they will be resurrected to the Millennium and hopefully, over the course of the Millennium, will mature to the point of going to heaven"). With the New Wine System, people can face the afterlife and see it as real.

Given this, believers are freed from the despair that accompanies the belief in the transitory life. They can shift their focus away from survival and enjoyment (get what you can in this life) and toward ethics and God (try to work toward becoming close to, and like, God in this life and the next). New Wine Christians might look at death as "falling asleep" the way Jesus and the early church did, something relatively mundane and lightweight,

rather than a tragedy mixed with a celebration as Christian dying can be seen under modern Christianity.

In New Wine or MSL thinking, is heaven a prosaic place? If we take the Bible of New Wine Christianity literally, it sounds like heaven (the New Jerusalem) is a giant cubical spaceship made out of weird, beautiful materials, which actually floats in heaven (the sky). I don't think modern people would make up that heaven, it wouldn't speak to them as normal beauty, so it doesn't work the same as modern poetry or imagination. It's too weird to be a beautiful dream (at least to me). It seems sort of orthogonal to my tastes, which perhaps is appropriate. That it doesn't fit with my desires gives it the taste of reality. Heaven isn't about what we want, it's about what God wants. Still, while it doesn't sound like my fantasy of heaven, it doesn't sound 100% prosaic either.

Should we assume that Revelation (the source of the New Jerusalem image) is literally true? My first thought is, no, it's explicitly a vision, and visions don't have to be literal. I guess it could be, but we should consider whether it's not. In that case, maybe Jesus saying that in his Father's house, there are many rooms (or words to that effect) gives us some idea.

(I'm not sure all of where Jesus could be seen to be talking about heaven. Here's the passage I was thinking of in the previous paragraph (John 14:1-4):

> 14:1 "Don't let your heart be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. 14:2 In my Father's house are many homes. If it weren't so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. 14:3 If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will receive you to myself; that where I am, you may be there also. 14:4 Where I go, you know, and you know the way."

Jesus' description is very plain and is consistent with a prosaic heaven. It does not rule out a poetic heaven. Without Revelation, I would default to thinking either prosaic or a plain kind of poetic heaven.)

MSL (which is apart from the Bible) doesn't commit us to any particular view of heaven, but it does commit us to a view of humans as being mature when they go there. When we are mature, will we need a heaven of magic, wonder, and maximal pleasure? Or will our tastes have changed? MSL does indicate that, unless somehow nobody hardens / rejects God, there will be an undercurrent of sorrow for the people who are not there. And even for those who are there, some of the truth of their existence there will involve how they got there, from lives of hardship and (temporary) enmity with God. I don't think that heaven will be a place of pure happy feelings, but overall tempered with sorrow. That is what love

of people and the truth call for. I suppose that heaven may involve qualitatively rich or new, otherworldly experiences, which speak to a sort of *Sehnsucht* (as C. S. Lewis uses it?) or Lewis's image of heaven as being like the world you know but five times bigger (I think he said something like that), but we won't need it to.

Labels: #aesthetics, #heaven, #holiness

Millennial Holiness

%millennial-holiness

Tuesday, September 12, 2023

11 February 2024: superseded by "voluntary millennial holiness".

For a little bit of time, I have been unsatisfied with the terminology available to describe my writing project. "MSL", or "MSLN", sounds weird, technical, "mathematical", artificial to me. For some people, those adjectives are not a problem. (For philosophers, especially analytic, maybe some STEM people, some intellectuals who are outsiders.) Also, while the term "New Wine" is a nice-sounding one, I feel like it belongs more to Philip Brown, who coined it, than to me. Neither "MSL" nor "New Wine" signal to a casual listener the content of those belief systems.

As I think about it, I think it's fine to call my philosophy "MSL", because it's intended for philosophically literate people. But it's good to have a general, broad label for the basic idea of both MSL and the New Wine System.

The two big points that I see in both MSL and New Wine Christianity are 1) becoming completely holy, and 2) having a millennium (or something like it) in which to become completely holy. So, "holiness" and "millennium". Or, we could say "millennial holiness". This does give some idea of its content, although for most people it is more a hint. It's a term that describes both MSL and New Wine Christianity, while allowing them to be different from each other in some respects (which seemed to make less sense if I called MSL a "New Wine" thing). (It may also describe Mormonism, and possibly Catholicism is related.)

So I plan to use "millennial holiness" sometimes where I would have used "New Wine" before. The past blog is what it is, and maybe if I can leave a note somewhere in it without too much effort, which makes the correction to help future blog readers (at least it should go in MSLN), that would be worth it. But I'm guessing that my blog will not be the introduction most people get to my writing at some point in the future, or perhaps this blog will be, but increasingly so the "era" in which I habitually use "millennial holiness".

Labels: #definition, #holiness, #writing

MSL's Relationship to Christianity

%msls-relationship-to-christianity

Tuesday, September 19, 2023

Reading *New Wine for the End Times* makes me think again about the Bible in more depth. This makes think I should write about MSL's relationship to Christianity.

One way for me to look at this question is to look at myself, as someone with some kind of relationship to both MSL and Christianity.

I was raised in a moderate church, probably "theologically conservative" but moderate in tone. I think I'm reacting to that, and assuming that, a lot of the time. I think the flaws of progressive and conservative Christianity are the flaws of "Los Angeles" while the flaws of moderate Christianity are those of "San Diego". In other words, moderate Christianity seems nicer than the other two and thus is more likely to have a serious but unexamined problem with it. MSL and New Wine Christianity call for excellence, while I think both being basically moderate in other respects. Hopefully that call for excellence makes up for the danger of complacency within moderate belief systems.

I had a significant, highly negative experience with a progressive Christian (this blog comes out of that experience, to some extent). I don't want to assume the worst of all of progressive Christianity because of what I went through, but I can't assume that all progressive Christians are different than the person that caused my negative experience.

Progressive Christianity has an epistemic openness and a willingness to question. I find this aspect of it trustworthy (assuming it is really willing to consider things that are or could be coded "conservative"). What I don't find trustworthy is its emphasis on ethical humanism to the exclusion of ethical theism. Perhaps it sounds good for God to serve humanity, and for humans to serve humanity. Then who serves God? Or are humans the highest end of both God and humans? It sounds like we are making ourselves the center of the universe.

A progressive Christian might look at that last paragraph and think "so you're basically on the side of the conservative Christians". I think conservative Christians (at their best) do try to put God at the center of the universe and not put humans there. But conservative Christianity isn't always good. I think there are (at least) two kinds of conservatives: the

kind who like to say "no" to other people, and the kind who value things so much that they try to protect them from other people. "Liberals" (the generous and free) have straightforward human desires. They think (often) that all conservatism is of the "say no to other people" kind, and they feel entitled to their straightforward human desires and think of conservatives as people who are unfair and want power over other people, this power which is proven by their ability to say "no" to them and restrict their straightforward human desires. They (seemingly) do not think that any conservatism is of the "there is something valuable, perhaps delicate, which must be protected from harm". I don't like saying "no" to people, so in that sense, I am a liberal (or, maybe I should say, I am not an "invalidating conservative"). But I also think there are things that are valuable, to be protected from harm, which are not part of what most (or most liberal) people think are "canonical, established straightforward human desires". In that sense I am a "protective" or "sensitive" conservative.

If a man has "straightforward human desires" for a woman, and she says "no", is she invalidating him? Or is she protecting something? He might think that her "sensitivities" (maybe her religion which she calls on to justify her desire to not have sex until marriage?) is a scam when all she really wants is to say "no" to him, to humiliate him and have power over him by keeping him from his natural desires. She has to invalidate him in order to protect herself, but her goal is to protect something, a good or a value which he does not respect. I think it likely that at least some of the time women do try to humiliate men and have power over them. (They really are the "invalidating conservatives".) But often (most of the time?) they are protecting something from the man. (They are really "protective" or "sensitive" conservatives.)

I think that conservatives reading this post would think that they were protective or sensitive conservatives, and generally I would agree with them. The "will-to-invalidate" is also in conservatives, some of the same who are at other times protective or sensitive, others who are only invalidating, with no concern for protecting.

Some progressive Christians might assume that I'm really a front for invalidating conservatism. That's not my intention. But I am not sure that I've made a case in my writing so far which forcefully establishes my actual intention. (Maybe I have, maybe not.) However, I think a truth-seeking progressive Christian should consider the possibility that maybe there is something to protect which they don't already recognize as being worth protecting, which conservative Christians (in this case correctly) think is worth protecting. Maybe my writing is a scam, maybe it's not. If it's not, what then?

A conservative Christian may then think "so you're a conservative Christian, like us". I think that there's something to that. However, I don't

believe the Bible is necessarily inerrant. I am not committed to the Bible primarily as my foundation for my faith in God. Nor am I committed to the church (the existing body of people who identify as Christians, or the culture of those people) in the same capacity. This is a radical difference ("radical" as "at the roots") from conservative Christianity as I understand it. Basically, I think that the idea of proving the existence of God through reason (MSL) is the kind of thing that would be undertaken by a rationalistic person, and if successful, would take weight off of the Bible and the church, if they were less reliable than it. So here we see MSL making me "epistemically progressive" or "epistemically liberal", which seemingly disqualifies me from being a conservative Christian (I think it's pretty fair to say it does disqualify me from being what we normally call a conservative Christian).

So far my blog has not had any pushback from conservative Christians, but that may well change. I do not have the mental resources to try to deal with huge texts like the Bible, or with history, or with reams of peoples' arguments one way or the other. (At least not now.) But I will discuss a little bit why I think the way I do about the Bible and the church, and at least if there are objections try to put them on my wiki [January 2024: replaced by this.] so that I (or someone else, perhaps) can address them someday. (My mental exhaustion may be another thing I have more in common with progressive Christians than conservative Christians.)

I can think of one major reason to doubt that everything in the Bible necessarily comes from God, which is that it (even its Jesus (Matthew 24:34)) expected the end of the world to come soon. But it didn't. Maybe we can dig in and say "well, there's a sense in which the world did end" or "the words that make us think Jesus expected it soon can be interpreted differently" or even "God changed his mind because maybe things were going better/worse than he expected". If I were committed to the Bible, I would choose one of those, or some other similar thing, to believe. But if uncommitted, I would think about how the early Christians thought one thing was going to happen, and it didn't, and say "well, there might be some sense in which the words that gave them that expectation are trustworthy, but it might also be the case that they were misguided by expectations that didn't come from God, and maybe the rest of the Bible is a mixture of good guidance and misguidance. Or maybe there are things that Jesus said that are accurately conveyed by the Gospels, but the end-times beliefs weren't among them".

However, I have found the Bible to be very helpful in my own life, trusting it as though it is true, at least as I understood it (i.e., reflecting what parts of it said, as it "plainly" or "naively" appeared to me). I think that the basic project of the Bible is the same as that of MSL, and that MSL is a continuation of it (though some conservative Christians might disagree). This increases my credence that the parts of the Bible that I don't trust

might be trustworthy anyway. Sometimes perhaps that causes me to re-evaluate what I don't trust, so that I do trust it, but it does not make me trust everything in the Bible, and I am not certain everything in the Bible is true.

I believe in the Jesus of the spiritual world. The Bible is an introduction to this Jesus, but there is a world in which the spirits live. Occult people "dial up" the spirit of Saturn (the god? the planet? both in one being?) and there is a whole world of spirits, one of whom is Jesus. (The Bible as it lives in our imaginations and memory is the Bible in the imaginal world, which is an access point to the world of spirits.) In my experience, this spirit is to be trusted. But is this spirit 100% the same as the man described in the Bible? I don't know. Does this spirit lend enough credence to the many things in the Bible to validate them all? I wouldn't assume so.

One argument for founding a person's faith on the church is that Christianity has to have a lot to do with the Bible (even progressive Christians seem to care about what the Bible says in some sense). Where did the Bible come from? The individual texts came (it is believed) from the Holy Spirit through human writers. But the church are the ones who canonized the Bible (selected the texts to go in it). We assume that the church was guided by the Holy Spirit when they did that. And the church are the ones who preserved and transmitted the Bible through time. So without the church, there would be no Bible.

Does that mean that we are beholden to the church? What exactly goes into the word "church"? If you don't go to "church", are you a bad Christian, or simply not a Christian? I think the church "wants" (it's a culture more than a conscious individual) you to go to church. Is that what God wants? Is church-centricness a cousin to progressive humanism? (Putting the focus on people rather than God.) Well, if the church is divinely inspired (a presupposition for the Bible to be divinely inspired, we think) then maybe the church is a source of authority in itself and individual Christians must submit to it. But if MSL is valid, then it takes the epistemic burden off of the church. The Bible gains credence because it resembles MSL (a publicly verifiable source of credence) and because its Jesus in some way is the same as the Jesus of the spirit world (a non-publicly verifiable source of credence, unless we all get in conscious contact with that world). The church gains credence to the extent that it is aligned with MSL's God.

Because of my experiences with the spirit world, and the confirmation from MSL, I think I trust in Jesus enough for me to be considered a Christian. But that spirit, and MSL, are the only points on which I'm significantly committed, and the Bible, and the culture that flows from it, I'm not so committed to. Not everything that is socially (or perhaps even Biblically) "church" is in tune with MSL and the Jesus of the spirit world (i.e., instead it takes Satan's side rather than Jesus' side, in Satan's war

against God and God's creatures.)

(My example doesn't have to be normative for all people interested in MSL. But I mention it because it's something concrete that I know about, and maybe it provides some guidance.)

So at this point, maybe it seems like I have struck blows for the side of "uncertainty" (a "progressive Christian" thing), so does that leave me really being progressive? I think that uncertainty could lead to a practical liberalism (where we don't know anything, so we default to our natural appetites for guidance), but it could also lead to a practical protective conservatism (where we don't know anything, so we consider the things to protect in every different likely scenario and try to figure out how best to manage the task of protecting things).

So far I've mostly talked from a Christian perspective. But I think that MSL does lend credence (or may; I haven't studied this myself) to non-Christian religions (a progressive Christian thing to say?). I don't think that any religion other than a basically Biblical Christianity (a New Wine Christianity) could be the most compatible with MSL, so the Bible would be most-recommended by it for the purposes of seeking God's preferences (a conservative Christian thing to say?). (But I suppose there might be some obscure religion somewhere that does better. In many ways that obscure religion that I hypothesize would have to be a form of Christianity, but perhaps using different terminology.)

We want to obey God, and so we search for his preferences, for wherever they might be: in reason, nature, and in holy books. We focus first on obeying God in the ways that we are most certain: what MSL recommends. Then, when we have time, we implement the less-certain obediences which are found only in the Bible (or perhaps other holy books). (This motion toward obedience is a typically conservative thing.)

The process of seeking ways to obey God, in the uncertain space of holy books, suggests an intellectual project: To seek what to obey (to come to prefer, act, and trust) from sources that may indicate what God wants -- uncertain obedience. Since we are not sure whether these ideas are from God or not, we consider the possibility that they are not from God, possibly even from Satan. Can we implement these "obediences" to what God may want in such a way that we minimize the damage caused in case they are from Satan, and maximize the good resulting, whether they are from Satan or from God?

(Given this project, why not look everywhere there are old values and revive or preserve them (to undo cultural Moloch), using the same metric of "how do we implement this to maximally serve God and minimally serve Satan?". Perhaps some old values are not compatible with God, but even with them, how much can be salvaged?)

Labels: #Christianity, #church, #personal, #spiritual warfare

Moving Forward

%moving-forward

Monday, September 25, 2023

In trying to think about my writing, I wrote a page called Categories of my Writing. I noticed different trends in my writing: "how can we love?", the "exilic/familial", "radically theistic / New Wine" (or, I should say now, "radically theistic / millennial holiness"), "aletheism". How would I now say all these things relate? And how do they relate to outside views?

Overall, I want to move forward. "Moving forward" characterizes "advancing kingdoms" -- the kingdom of God, or civilization, or justice, or something like that. One thing I have had to do is move beyond being more into advancing secular things (civilization, justice, etc.) and into doing good in a really theistic way (advance the kingdom of God, the God who really exists).

Is the project (or projects) of "moving forward" a good thing? I can think of some "dissents": postmodernism (in my mind "there are a diversity of viewpoints none of which can be said are invalid"), and elements of the "exilic/familial" (the sense that nobody wins, and we mourn the death of our enemies). If we mourn our enemies too much, then we risk being on their side, or sinking into inactivity. Being on their side might sound like a good thing if we think that we are on the side of them as persons. But we should not necessarily adopt everyone else's point of view. The truth is what it is -- that our enemies are wrong necessarily connects to the fact that there is something we need to do in the world.

Another dissent is the apocalyptic view (in the sense of, there is only a little bit of time left). I feel that this is working deep, under the surface of our culture, in a way we don't always explicitly state. But it can be an explicit view (climate, AI, the perennial religious end-times thinking). If there is no more time left, then we lost motivation to move forward.

Another dissent is the appeal to human nature, or other kinds of nature, or the body, or health. Human nature certainly isn't the best thing we can conceive of, but it's also not the worst. Health calls for moderation (for not moving forward too much, or not at all in a sense, since we already have the body and its desires).

Those engaged in the project of moving forward might become disillusioned with its failures (they might be on the side of moving forward still, in principle, but might have lost some faith in it because they see the damage it causes, or its inability to bring about what we think it promises). Prophets speak the unvarnished truth which "nobody" wants to

hear, for the sake of the truth, even if it seems unhelpful for them to do so.

Part of moving forward involves the truth. How do we know the truth? Can we know the truth? For the postmodernist, the claim is that there is no one truth. For the Reformed (Calvinist) thinker, the claim is that humans can't naturally come to know the truth, and God has to give us that truth (this undermining natural reason). Buddhism and modern science also cast doubt on natural reason.

The Bible itself (I think, this is my reading) contains both moving forward and critique of moving forward. Abraham is called by God to found a new nation to bless the whole world ("moving forward") (Genesis 12:1-3). But he is also commanded by God to sacrifice his son, who is the child through whom that nation is supposed to descend (Genesis 22). David weeps for his son Absalom (who had been killed after trying to take the throne from David), but then David realizes (is told) that he has to live for the ongoing process, for the people who were on his (rightful) side (2 Samuel 19:1-7). Should you trust the voice of God? Overall you should. Should you fight for God's project (as I think the Bible would say David was doing more so than Absalom was)? Yes, but you have to acknowledge the danger in what you're doing and listen to the critique.

I use the term "moving forward" rather than "progress" because while progress is a form of moving forward, there is also the moving forward needed to preserve the things that already exist. Neither the church, civilization, nor justice will maintain their current sizes/fullness (in general) unless individual people move forward. The dissents to moving forward take away energy that can help people move forward -- whether to maintain what is good or to make things better.

"How can we love?" is about "moving forward". "Radical theism" contains both "moving forward" and concern for every person (because every person came from God -- every person has a history of being a child descended from God, even if they choose to reject God permanently) -- thus, mourning and losing (like in the "exilic/familial"). God loses in the end -- but he doesn't have to lose as much. Love mourns what is lost, but has to apply effort to prevent further loss.

I think that evangelicals (at least, the best of them) balance this forward-moving with a concern for every person, a concern which does not demoralize them but causes them to move forward (in a way that does not "outpace" the people they try to help), and I would consider my writing project overall to be evangelical in a certain basic sense.

I think it is wise to consider the dissents to moving forward, as each contain some element of wisdom and can be a check on moving forward in a misguided way.

Postmodernism in a strong-enough form is a way to close the mind against

the possibility of there being answers, and this I find hard to like. But in a sufficiently weak form, it says "you have to listen to everyone's point of view in seeking the truth, and when you start the discussion, everyone's view is equally valid". Or it could say as well "You feel like X is true from your own experience and reason, but other people believe not-X. Why do you think you're right and they're wrong?"

Apocalypticism biases us to do good in the short term. Perhaps we have too many incentives to do good in the short term already. But maybe apocalypticism biases us to act intensely in the short term. I don't know if that always is a good thing, but it's worth considering. Apocalypticism may also bias us to rest, a similarly mixed thing to pursue.

Concern for health, the body, human nature, etc. is necessary to keep us from burning out and to do good in an unhealthy way tends to be doing something that has evil mixed in it somewhere. Health-pursuing, like postmodernism, can close the mind, but if it does not make itself a god, it is something worth listening to. Respect for human nature (in the sense of seeing it there, like you see a rattlesnake in your path) and typical human fallibility is wise.

Those who move forward but in the process of moving forward critique specific ways of moving forward, are doing something good to make sure that their efforts are really good instead of bad, as long as they avoid demoralizing themselves (or other people) about the overall process of moving forward.

Reformed, Buddhist, and scientific questioning of human's natural ability to reason each have their uses.

The Reformed perspective says "you are not God". I think people should move forward, try to have the values of God and then do the things that God wants, which are in line with those people's values now that they have adopted God's values. So you should see what you see and do what you want. You want to do what is good, so your appetite is trustworthy when you want that. When you do what you and God want, you are an agent of God. You are becoming like God, on the small scale that you can act in. Everyone who acts out God's will is in a sense God himself, his body. When you behave completely legitimately, you are part of Legitimacy.

However, there is a sense in which you are not God and never will be. God's work is much greater than yours. Your work has a boundary to it and many things happen outside your work. Your work is affected by things you don't understand, but which God does understand.

If you are trustworthy, people will trust you, and some will think you are most-trustworthy on a deeper level -- they will give you the glory and not God, and this is a dangerous mistake. If they make you an idol, you (with

all of your trustworthiness) could keep them from loving God.

So it is good to consider the Reformed perspective (in which it can sometimes seem like God does everything). I don't think it's literally true that God does everything and we do nothing, but it's a good perspective.

The Buddhist perspective can be taken as a means to achieve mental health (see above). The scientific perspective can elucidate human nature (see above). Also it teaches us to think carefully and biases us to not trust our intuitions, which is a good thing up to a point.

All of these things are dangerous when they close the mind to the good that we really should be doing, the forward moving that we should really take seriously. Buddhist and Reformed critiques of reason need to see the danger that they are wrong and that reason is saying something valuable (as much as it is important for rationalists to consider that their reasoning is dangerous, as Buddhist or Reformed thinkers allege). I would propose that everyone move forward with their worldview (postmodern, Reformed, Buddhist, evangelical, etc.), but periodically consider that which questions their worldview, take it as a live possibility.

This would be an "aletheistic" thing to do.

So, perhaps I could integrate all of the above into a kind of formula:

Movement: Motivate yourself strongly ("how can we love?") to go into the secular world to some extent ("how can we love?"), but primarily to reach people to prevent them from hardening and dying the second death ("radically theistic / millennial holiness"), seeing them as kin, children of a God who risks losing them if they reject him ("exilic/familial"), not as people to defeat but rather people to mourn ("exilic/familial") but overall still moving forward with the work to make the world more the way God wants it to be ("how can we love?"), anti-tempting ourselves and those around us ("radical theism / millennial holiness").

Dissents: We need to question the movement from time to time ("aletheism"). We can consider "dissents", like Reformed, Buddhist, health-oriented, human nature-oriented, postmodern, and apocalyptic thinking (mentioned above). Or perhaps even the Bible could be considered as a dissent, or both a dissent and a support (call of Abraham and binding of Isaac / David mourning Absalom and moving on). Or there could be other dissents not mentioned. The movement is improved by the dissents, but overall the movement is where you are headed.

Semi-dissents: We need to improve the movement. We might accept it as it is on a "coarse-grained" level, but on a "fine-grained" level still want to improve it. This requires self-criticism. Perhaps this self-criticism can morph into full-on dissent.

A person could try to live this out (or an improved version of it) both somehow integrating all of the above into everything they do in each moment (or getting closer to doing that), or by going through phases.

Labels: #altruism, #Buddhism, #Calvinism, #civilization, #evangelicalism, #modernism, #motivation, #postmodernism, #postpostmodernism, #truth

Blog Review: Formulalessness, 2019 - 2023

%blog-review-formulalessness-2019-2023

Tuesday, September 26, 2023

I have often written things in a sort of diaristic way, not knowing how they would appear to me until I finished and re-read them for the first time. This blog has been a diary of my thinking. I feel as though I've been approaching the end, or an end, of my blog (for instance, not writing too much since fall of 2022). So, I've been engaging in behaviors of summarizing and wrapping up, and included in that, I've been re-reading my blog.

I re-read the whole thing up to the present post, except I didn't finish reading the *Feeling of Value* notes (1, 2), because simply to read them was too philosophical for me, and as I've mentioned, I'm trying to abstain from philosophy until October 2024. (Reading notes requires trying to figure out what I was saying, and trying to evaluate what I was saying turns into philosophy, according to me.)

Certain things stood out as things to come back to someday. Maybe re-reading the *Feeling of Value* notes and the Lukas Gloor sequence on moral anti-realism, plus other sources, to do a better job of talking about moral realism / anti-realism. Also, maybe writing a clearer presentation of the arguments implicit in my review of *X-Risk* by Thomas Moynihan. Occasionally, people find my blog through the *Feeling of Value* and *X-Risk* reviews, and what I have to offer isn't too user-friendly.

Generally, I could go back and try to improve past posts, and maybe make a few books out of them. Perhaps one for effective altruists.

Another thought is to use my wiki [January 2024: which I took down] as a place to write clearer versions of many of these posts, or to break down their ideas and recombine them in different ways that suit the subject matter better than my sometimes arbitrary lumpings of them. Then I could make a book or books based on the wiki.

There were times my present self (reviewing the blog) wished my past self had been clearer, argued better, or wrote more fleshed-out posts. I suppose that if I were a professional writer, I might have evaluated myself sooner than after four years as I'm doing now. I got into writing this blog just to

put my notes online (at least, that's mainly what I did), and once the habit got going, I guess I didn't question what the product would be.

What niche does the blog fill? I would say that if you are a Christian interested in futurism, it takes you a certain way into the topic of Christianity-and-futurism. If you are a futurist, it shows a vision of a particular kind of theistic/Christian input into how the future should go. I don't know what my actual readers get out of it -- maybe something else. Blogs often are really all about their themes, their vibe, and a few of their memorable ideas. I do think that this blog has a vibe to it, and that's an undercurrent of it, that there's a spiritual world that connects to our everyday experience, and a spirit that breathes through us, which is imaged by the writing. Some themes of this blog are openmindedness, trust, truth, reason, and ethical theism (not a complete list).

If I'm thinking hopefully, I think this blog communicates a unique vision of how to be a Christian, or a Christian-like theist, a new religion or set of religions that helps deal with the divisions (progressive/conservative, secular/religious, perhaps Christian/non-Christian) and lack of motivation that keep people from God, and keep society locked into conflict and ineffectiveness.

Writing the blog served me. I started the blog (in early 2019) because it felt like time to write a blog. The fact that I had been reading Slate Star Codex since fall of 2016 was in the background of that decision. In early 2019, I was experiencing a mental breakdown (which lasted about three years at full strength and then diminishing to now), which largely was caused by others' indifference and hostility, lack of support and poisonous support. Having something to focus on other than the memories of the people who caused the mental breakdown, and the thoughts of despair they put in me, was helpful and gave me a direction forward.

Reviewing the blog from start to finish eventually started resembling, to me, reading any number of my diaristic works from 2015 - 2018 (most of the books found here). Those books emerged from me as a flow of writing, expressing something subtextual through their wholes. I think the same could be said of this blog, although to me at least the subtextual note is fainter. Both those old books and this blog have an aesthetic of "formulalessness".

Labels: #Christianity, #futurism, #news and meta, #personal, #religion, #writing

Long Links #4

%long-links-4

Wednesday, October 11, 2023

On my subreddit I put up links to individual videos, websites, or blog posts, etc. Any of these things can be "consumed" (paid attention to) in one sitting (generally speaking). Those are "short links". But "long links" take (or take me) more than one sitting and to me seem to not belong in the same context as short links.

--

I started playing a DOS RPG called *Aethra* by Michael Lawrence. It's been a while since I've played a computer game seriously.

I did most of my computer game (and video game) playing between maybe the age of 11 and 20. I had a somewhat superficial understanding of what was going on in the games and in me when I played. Now, many years and many experiences later, I get a lot more out of this game than I expect I would have then.

For instance, the idea of forming an adventuring party seems to be an image for a process in everyday life. The adventuring party is made up of people with their advantages and drawbacks. Then, over time, it is necessary to mitigate the drawbacks and make use of the advantages. There is a degree of complementarity between the members of the party, but they each have to hold their own in a fight, to some extent, because the other characters can't always help them.

I've played a lot of Angband. In a roguelike, like Angband, there is only one adventurer, one whom I never really saw as a person -- really he or she was just me, I was the one in the dungeon, and when their game was over ("death") it was really just my project that was over ("try to see how far I can get in the game"). There can be a real sense of loss when you lose a character in a roguelike, but it's not the loss of a person, rather the loss of a venture. In this game, I can't identify with just one person, since the party has three members, so they seem more like separate persons to me. It's too soon to say how this will affect how I play the game or what I get out of it.

I feel more like these are real people than novel or movie characters do to me. In a novel or movie, to me, people are just images, living in a completely different universe. But in an RPG, I'm involved in the characters' world, making decisions. This is one of the comparative advantages of games, in that they get a person to live in the imaginary, or

imaginal, world.

--

I watched *Millennium Actress*, directed by Satoshi Kon. It's a good movie. At first I found its "beautiful dream"/past-oriented aesthetic too powerful, and found that it took me away from doing things I needed to do in my life in the present (helping a friend). So its beauty was kind of untrustworthy. But for me, the "beautiful dream" feeling faded, and I was left with a kind of simantic word or imaginal symbol that I think could be helpful in everyday life, in working to do good. The movie is basically about a moth who flies to a star.

--

I watched *We Are Not Ghouls*, directed by Chris James Thompson, a documentary about a US military lawyer's representation of a Guantanamo Bay suspect. It has some relevance to "the cross" (suspect undergoes torture, the lawyer goes against the system, endures stress). The lawyer (Yvonne Bradley) was the main person interviewed and I think she had a good presence that's worth watching.

Labels: #computer/video games, #criminal justice, #love, #what is a person?

Missionary Care for Creatives in Los Angeles; or for others

%missionary-care-for-creatives-in-los

Thursday, October 12, 2023

I wrote a post about cultural altruism hubs. That post, and this one, which is related, discuss a kind of organizational or "scenic" structure or structures that people could build. I don't feel like this is a thing I should pursue, so I'm not looking to try to build those structures myself. But I think the ideas are worth writing up. Maybe someone else will find them useful.

I often write to a secular audience, or to no audience / to myself. But in this case, I write more to a Christian audience.

Creative people are especially susceptible to spiritual attack. Culture war brings out Satan. Some cultural-spiritual warfare is fought by "foot soldiers" (through interpersonal contact). Others through "air support". Airplanes are sophisticated machines. Books, movies, etc. are machines made out of thoughts and images. Culture "flies in the air". So producing cultural artifacts puts new "airplanes" or "drones" in the sky. These artifacts fight each other and fight people on the ground. With good air support, ground troops can have an easier time. So (I think) with good cultural artifacts, interpersonal evangelism and discipleship can go better.

Los Angeles is a center of the movie and music industries, which manufacture cultural artifacts (that part of the "air war"). Those industries are not always kind to the people who try to work in them. Many people have dreams of success in them, but only a few can succeed. There are stories of exploitation in those industries. This can affect everyone who tries to "make it". The overall culture of these industries seems to largely be non-Christian. Christians trying to work in those industries may experience as much exploitation and as many broken dreams of success as non-Christians. They may also experience culture shock and spiritual attack (for instance, being invited to hedonistic parties (something that I would guess happens), or being acculturated to the dominant secular culture to the point of compromising their faith). They may also experience hostility, due to their beliefs.

Are Christian creatives in Los Angeles missionaries? Arguably yes. So they can be supported and cared for like any other kind of missionary. (I

recommend reading *Serving as Senders Today* and *The Reentry Team*, both by Neal Pirolo, to understand what I have in mind by "support" and "care". Briefly, churches or other sending teams can provide moral support, prayer support, send and receive messages about what's going on in the field, maybe money or logistical support, and help in missionaries transitioning in and out of service.)

Creative missionaries could care for fellow creatives and engage in evangelism and discipleship like any other kind of missionary. But they also "translate the Bible into the native language" of their fellow creatives, by being creative themselves, and/or into the language of the US in general, or even of other parts of the world, where LA culture industries reach.

I feel like if I were a suspicious secular person (perhaps an ex-Christian), an incorporated missionary agency sending financially supported creative missionaries into LA would be disturbing and lead to bad press (if evangelical Christians think that there is an oppressive, militant "other" in the cultural world, so do secular people -- everyone is "David" seeing "Goliath" in each other). Creative people tend to have their own ideas and some might not want to work with a missionary agency themselves. (It's good for creative people to be independent-minded in order to see what other people don't see.) Financially supported missionaries might be harder to relate to by struggling actors, writers, musicians, directors, etc. that they may be trying to reach.

So I think maybe the best way to implement creative missions is to set up structures to care for and support the creative Christians who find themselves in Los Angeles, as though they have sent themselves already, but maybe without enough support.

--

Implementation:

I don't know anything about what might already be going on in this area. I can imagine that something like this is already going on.

I think churches in Los Angeles are already doing some of this support and care work. What they might not have is the sense that their creatives are missionaries dealing with spiritual warfare, culture shock, etc., and not know as much as they could of how to be good "senders" and "carers". Perhaps what is needed is to equip those churches.

Also, creatives might not have the sense that they are missionaries on a mission field. They might benefit from additional teaching and encouragement in having a really Christian worldview and practice in their art and life.

Other ideas:
1. Establishing refuge places in Southern California so that people can (affordably) get out of LA to take a break from it.
2. Connecting churches that have creatives to creatives in LA. (Not every church is a good place for a creative person to be.)

Southern California (plus northern Baja California) could be seen as having two areas of strategic significance for cultural people: Tijuana which is a gateway to Latin America and/or to understanding the non-American, non-"developed" world; and the cultural artifact manufacturing center of Los Angeles. In between is San Diego, a quieter place (maybe the military in San Diego is of cultural strategic significance?).

--

Caveats:

I have not spent a lot of time in LA. I was involved in a low-budget film production that got actors from LA and have seen the incentives for exploitation and selling yourself in filmmaking. I can sense a certain amount of felt unhappiness and spiritual darkness from Los Angeles filmmaking (Hollywood and I guess "aspiring Hollywood" or indie film productions). I don't have direct experience with the music industry in LA.

--

Postscript:

What about film directors? I mentioned them above. They are employers, people in positions of power. But they are at the mercy of their funding sources. Directors have to cobble together funding and employees from various sources, and then work intensely during production, with long pre-production and post-production times. Once finished, they sell their product on the market and hope for critical and financial success, which is uncertain. A lot of money rides on what they do. If they lose too much money, maybe they can't work again. It sounds like a risky, stressful, "disestablished" line of work.

This sounds like perhaps a more intense (or not) version of what entrepreneurs in general go through.

A film director could do the wrong thing because they are under some kind of pressure. Perhaps it is true of any kind of entrepreneur. Or business executive. How much wrongdoing comes from powerful people who are (subjectively or objectively) in insecure positions? Perhaps it would be good to come up with care and support for them.

Maybe if a person doesn't have money, that's their hard limit, and only with additional funding would they be able to do the right thing. (Maybe there could be funding to help them do the right thing?) With better

support (prayer, moral, logistic, communication) and the expectation that they can get care if they fail, they might have more courage to do the right thing in marginal cases where they may not really be risking their success, (where perhaps it is some kind of delusion of danger or sin that puts its thumb on the scale of their perception of risk), or even in self-sacrificial cases where they have to sacrifice their success (their business venture/ film? / career?) to do the right thing.

(Funding to help do the right thing: a director could develop a relationship with a funding agency that would commit to providing at least a significant part of the director's funding for each of their films, conditional on them doing the right thing and not necessarily on them being commercially successful. In other words, provide grace, or slack, so that directors can fail commercially if they do the right thing on set or in their other operations.)

(Conservative talk radio, to me, sounds like the voice of people who are suspicious and hardworking -- maybe small business owners who could easily go out of business and who have to deal with other insecure people who might cut corners or make untrustworthy deals to survive. Can there be care and support for them?)

Likewise, people in the spiritually dark worlds of the elites. Do Washington, DC churches adequately care for politicians and staffers who fight a culture war of their own? Political theater is part of the "air war" that movies are also involved in. Political decisions and governmental implementations of them have cultural consequences.

(Silicon Valley sounds like a place with its darkness and its own, different culture. What about it?)

People with bad reputations (criminals, prison guards, and police, for instance) may need care and support. It requires discernment how to support someone who has directed their life toward wrongdoing.

Like with creative missionaries in LA, I don't know anything about what might already be going on with care / support for people in these areas.

--

The church I grew up in had a sign over the door as you went out, that said "You are now entering the mission field". Probably everyone could see themselves as a missionary, and everyone experiences occupational hazards as they interface with the world. And so everyone could be sent and cared for -- by other people who also could be sent and cared for. Do churches send and care for their own pastors? (Maybe pastors should have some support from outside their own congregations.)

--

Everything is powerful, culturally. Everything sends a message. The way you do business as a small business owner affects the overall culture, the sense of how things are and how people act. Similarly with the products a business owner releases on the market. Each one is a movie or book, conditioning people's minds. The caring professions are culturally powerful.

This raises the question: if everyone has cultural power, if each person can say something that has a significant effect on someone (at least on him- or herself), what should you say? Are you the missionary for God and the truth, or for an off-flavor of God and a somewhat misleading truth? You have to seek to know what is true, so that you can correct what is wrong.

This process of self-correction has to go on on a societal level. Society (people within it) must speak against what is believed by society (other people within it). What does it take to oppose a consensus or effective consensus? What if the consensus involves the caring structures that you can find? Who will care for you when you burn out? Will the price of getting care be that you have to stop pointing out what's wrong?

So as much as care and support sound like a good thing, for at least some people, those who would point out what is least popular, it may be good to develop independence from human support and care. A wise society concerned with protecting itself from its own blind spots might try to develop the strength behind that independence in people, and not only promote care and support for people. For a believer in God, deriving strength from God, rather than from people, is a way to be strong enough to say what's unpopular.

It's possible for Christian (church-based) culture to somewhat discourage the individual from seeing things from their own perspective, and instead tries to enmesh them in a social organism. An individual church, and many individual people, will fare better if they are simply in-some-sense-"properly" interrelated socially. But Christianity as a whole suffers if it becomes blind due to its success in orienting individuals toward the points of view of their nearby congregations, which all can potentially be misguided.

Labels: #art, #Christianity, #church, #cultural altruism, #culture, #Los Angeles, #mental health, #mental strength, #missions, #spiritual warfare, #truth

News: 23 October 2023

%news-23-october-2023

Monday, October 23, 2023

I have recently released two booklets: *The Cross: altruism through self-risking*, and *Simple Millennial Holiness: (and Other Religious Thoughts)* (which is a partial rewrite of the *Simple New Wine System* booklet).

Labels: #news and meta

2023 to 2024

%2023-to-2024

Monday, January 1, 2024

Review of 2023:

From my perspective now, looking back, 2023 was a year of wrapping things up and closing out accounts. In terms of the major things that I did, the only thing that doesn't fit neatly in that category is the release of *Wordless Prayers* and some glockenspiel music. Everything else (releasing *Waiting for Margot*, releasing *Reality*, re-reading *New Wine for the End Times*, re-reading this blog and making various related posts) fit into the category of "finishing up a particular writing project I've worked on since 2013".

In what sense is the project really finished? I do see myself moving away from writing that pursues secular well-being (more or less, the "how can we love?" and "exilic/familial" categories) toward more theistic / religious, etc. So maybe the "highwater mark" for my writing about some of the secular categories was reached in the blog already. I think the blog could be a sketch of my whole project, and from now on I could be filling in details.

I did not discover any major new intellectual scenes or interests in 2023. (Unlike getting more into effective altruism in 2020, discovering the "Christian humanists" in 2021, or getting into Indonesia in 2022.) At least, none that stand out in my memory. Relatively minor interests in some YouTube channels and in movie-watching. (I did keep up with the EAs and "Christian humanists" some in 2023.)

I did delete my Twitter account finally. (That's another "closing-up of accounts".)

Comparison of expectations with reality

Last year's predictions were mixed in quality. I did release an old book (*Waiting for Margot*) and a demo of an album (*Reality*). I didn't do much with poetry. I wrote blog posts. But I missed the whole "summing up" theme, which seems to me to be the most interesting aspect of 2023.

Preview of 2024:

I feel like *Wordless Prayers* and my glockenspiel music are OK, but seem to me like they have limited potential. My songwriting, I think, is more interesting to me and seems like it has more potential, but I feel like I

probably won't pursue it a lot in the coming year. [On further thought, I'm not as sure I won't pursue it.]

I plan to start reading (and maybe writing) philosophy again this fall. I want to see if I can get MSL to a state where it is fleshed-out and persuasive. Also to improve on the articulation of MSL with people like Rawlette, Moynihan, and the EAs. This could take multiple years and give me plenty to do.

I think my main focus until the fall is to read books that may not fall directly in the path of my writing project. I want to fill in gaps in my general education and also make a list of books worth recommending. A similar project I have going is to update my subreddit.

I don't think I will use the blog much for a while, but if I do and it's really important, I will post about it on the subreddit.

Labels: #news and meta

Voluntary Millennial Holiness

%voluntary-millennial-holiness

Sunday, February 11, 2024

At some point in the past, a commenter on this blog pointed out the resemblance between MSLN and Mormonism with regard to soteriology and eschatology. Having read *Gospel Principles*, an introduction to Mormon doctrine put out by the Mormon Church (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), I think that Mormonism does fit the two basic ideas of millennial holiness of 1) Everyone must become completely holy before going to heaven, and 2) there is a long but finite time in which to complete this process. (I am less sure, but suspect that at least to some extent this is also true of Catholic and Orthodox theology.)

In terms of the potential power of the motivational structure of MSL, I felt as I read that the Mormon perspective does not drive motivation as much as the New Wine System, or my concept of "millennial holiness" would. Millennial holiness, as I defined it before, exists, and we know about how strong it is in motivating people. Certainly the Mormon, and perhaps Catholic or Orthodox, churches are active and productive in their own ways, but they are what they are. Yet, I think that there is something else, which I think I remember from the New Wine System, and which I do see in my own "millennial holiness" doctrine, which is different than Mormonism and may not have ever been implemented in a major way, the way Mormonism has been.

I would say that I emphasize the freedom of the will to the extent that people's salvation is really up in the air. We really could decide not to trust God fully. We really could decide to harden ourselves against God, and shut down our ability to freely choose God. This would be an element of voluntariness to salvation. I can't be sure, from what I read, that Mormonism didn't support this at all "officially" or "on the books". But it was not emphasized in *Gospel Principles* and if I were writing the equivalent of *Gospel Principles* for my own beliefs, I would emphasize clearly that there is a risk of hardening, or of failing to fully repent, because this is an important thing to know, to avoid a seriously bad outcome.

So I would add "voluntary" to "millennial holiness", thus "voluntary millennial holiness". Those three words are a mouthful, but they do (I hope) now convey the essentially "New Wine" or "MSL" belief system that I

think has such motivational power. I could shorten them to "VMH", which unfortunately adds to the "alphabet soup" of my writing. But at least if someone hears me say "VMH" and asks about it, I can say "it stands for 'voluntary millennial holiness'" and not have too much trouble explaining those three words. Whereas I would have a harder time doing that with "New Wine" or "MSL", and those two labels go beyond what "voluntary millennial holiness" is talking about.

Labels: #definition, #holiness, #Mormonism, #writing

Afterward Release

%afterward-release

Wednesday, March 6, 2024

I made a MIDI album that fits in with my overall writing project, called *Afterward*. If you've read this blog a lot, you will probably understand what I was trying to communicate with it.

Labels: #music, #news and meta

News: 16 April 2024

%news-16-april-2024

Tuesday, April 16, 2024

I released a condensed version of the MSL argument today in this booklet.

I hope that it makes it easier to see the whole argument in one view.

Recently thinking about Islam some, and have been working on new music.

Labels: #news and meta

Problem of Evil / Temptation Contract Theory talk

%problem-of-evil-temptation-contract

Saturday, May 18, 2024

This is based on a talk I would have given to a rationalist group, but then I found out that it was too long for their format. It's based on various previous posts on "theodicy" and I think is my best presentation of the topic.

The topic for this talk is the Problem of Evil, and one way of resolving it through a labor relations approach. Most of my interests are in philosophy and religion and might not be conventional subjects for a rationalist community group to talk about. However, I bring this up due to its use of economic thinking, in a way perhaps slightly reminiscent of the George Mason University economists.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The Problem of Evil is the apparent contradiction caused by the following statements all claiming to be true:

1. God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful
2. Evil exists

If God is all-good, why doesn't he prevent evil? Is it because he's not all-knowing or all-powerful? Maybe he is all-knowing and all-powerful. Then he must be less than all-good if he doesn't prevent it.

One way to soften things is to say that humans are the source or occasion of much evil. Either we commit the evil directly (it follows from our free-willed actions or inactions), or it is useful in "soul-making" (it gives us the occasion to become better people). This idea makes sense to me, to a point, but I think that it's hard to rule out the idea that some suffering is useless for that purpose. Suffering in wild animals being maybe the easiest example.

One approach that theists take is to say that we don't understand, but somehow these threads will be tied up for us someday, and the ultimate good and necessity of evil will be explained. I find this approach somewhat unsatisfying. So I thought I might try to come up with a more

concrete solution to the Problem of Evil.

BACKGROUND TO TEMPTATION THEORY

First I will talk about my theory of God, my "theology". I think that God is primarily a good God. His goodness takes priority over other characteristics. In fact, for reasons I am not prepared to defend right now, I think that his goodness is the source of being, and thus of his power. This means that God is limited by his own goodness. I think this is a necessary property of a trustworthy God. Ultimately, a maximally trustworthy God is better for us than a maximally powerful one.

I want to show that God's allowance of evil flows naturally from his goodness.

For reasons that I won't defend here, suppose that in order for us to live in God's presence, we must be free from any evil in our hearts (in our intentions). God wants us to live forever, and so wants to provide a way for us to fully turn against evil in our intentions.

We need to really choose good. The way we do that is to really reject evil, even when evil looks attractive, even cartoonishly attractive. So we need evil presented to us in a way which looks good.

I postulate that God is incapable of presenting evil to us in such a way that it looks good. I'm not sure I could prove that, but on first inspection I think it sounds likely. A God who is goodness itself might have scruples against tempting us.

TEMPTATION CONTRACT THEORY

If so, then we have a situation where God's goodness makes him powerless to do a necessary part of bringing us to a state of having truly good intentions.

He needs other beings to tempt us. What kind of beings would tempt us? Presumably, evil beings. So God has to go to evil beings for help.

Temptation may be beyond the power of all the evil beings to actually implement. But God clearly acts out the will of his creatures. For instance, if you shoot a gun, you don't really will the bullet to go where it goes. You make a decision to shoot and where to aim, but the carrying out of that decision is done by God. So God could act out the decision of the evil beings.

If we sin, it is often God who is the efficient cause of the sin. He is our

servant or slave. And God offers to be our servant or slave in this for the greater good of letting us act. So he can do the same, being the slave of evil beings. But the evil must come from the will of the evil beings.

How does God get the evil beings to will temptation for him? I propose that he does something like work out a contract with them. At a point in time, presumably far in the past, God allows his situation of need to be known. The evil beings know that they have leverage over God. They can demand concessions. Some of these concessions could include whatever evil that has no redeeming value. Because they are evil, they are paid with evil.

Does this mean that God tempts the evil beings to tempt us? My response as of now is to say it doesn't count as temptation for two reasons. One is that God does not will them to tempt, but simply lets them do what is in their nature. He doesn't put his thumb on the scale, the way they do with us. The other reason is that perhaps the critical sin in temptation is calling bad good. That the tempters tempt is actually a good thing, from a consequentialist perspective (since it allows us to come into tune with God) but for deontological reasons it is impermissible for this to be done by God himself.

WHY ISN'T THE WORLD WORSE?

If evil beings can have such serious bargaining power, why isn't the world worse? Are there any checks to their power? My theory has to explain why there is the amount of evil we have in the world, which seems finite, mixed with considerable finite good.

God and the evil beings are both bargaining with each other. God chooses which evil beings to work with. He can choose the ones who give him a good deal. He will not sign a contract that includes evil that keeps us from being with him forever. Things can happen in this life, and we can make decisions, which contribute to us failing to fully come to have good intentions. I don't believe God can know what is unknowable (states of affairs that don't exist yet, like future events). But whatever states of affairs have to obtain to give us the chance to make the right or wrong decisions, to create that risk, are ones which God would not sacrifice to the evil beings' negotiation. We live in a world in which it was worth it to God to create. So this predicts a generally hopeful state of affairs in the end, as long as each of us seeks to be in tune with God.

Evil beings offer their labor for wages, and collectively, there is a wage floor. Humans won't work for less than their wage floor (which might be "the amount of money necessary for minimal shelter, clothes, water, and food"). Evil beings want a certain amount of evil done in compensation for the good they do. If they were perfectly rational, they might push for a

truly nightmarish human existence. But perhaps not all evil beings are rational to that extent. Lust is part of the psychology of evil beings. The lust for evil can lead to a strong demand for it, but also to a kind of pragmatism and impatience in seeking it, seeking to have what the evil being can have, now, rather than holding out for a really "excellent" implementation of evil-doing. Lust for evil could be an appetitive rather than calculating thing, or appetitive enough to inhibit or distort an evil being's utility-maximizing calculations.

So God may be able to negotiate with the most pragmatic and impatient of lustful evil beings, the ones who will sell out their labor for the lowest evil wages, yet these beings, because of their lust, have an absolute floor to what they will demand from him. The nature of the evil beings' psychology, how much evil their lust absolutely demands, determines the exact level of gratuitous evil that we see in the world around us.

Does God create the nature of evil beings' psychology and thus determine the level of evil in the world all by himself? Not if the nature of evil beings' psychology is substantially created by their own free willed choices to become evil.

The theory I have mentioned, I could call a labor relations theory of the Problem of Evil. The negotiations between different economic actors, in the economy of good and evil, produces a nuanced world. Just as the world we live in is the product of governments, corporations, civil society, individuals, etc. with differing points of views negotiating the mixture of all sort of different values in what we actually see and have to put up with, among these different voices there are also both God and evil beings. From a theistic standpoint, the way to analyze it might be that reality is a negotiation between God and what is not on the side of God.

CONCLUSION

What I hope to have accomplished in this talk is to show that the evil in this world flows naturally from the existence of a certain kind of good God. However, as you have listened, perhaps you have thought of questions or objections. I'm interested to hear them.

Labels: #economics, #evil, #God, #philosophy

Instead of Acting, Pray

%instead-of-acting-pray

Monday, June 3, 2024

My writing encourages people to act. I think it is good to act, and to try to do the highest-impact thing you can. But sometimes people shouldn't act. They may have bad personalities or bad characters. Or problems with their personalities or characters. They may be unable to do things, or not have good enough judgment. They may have mental health problems, or are tied down by life's commitments.

But it's important to care. How can you care without acting? Acting helps you care. If you care, you tend to act. It's tempting to force yourself to act, or to do a particular thing, so that you can care. But sometimes that makes things worse than if you hadn't acted.

You can always pray. This enables you to care, even if you are not the instrument for God's action in the world.

Labels: #altruism, #prayer

Learning Indonesian, Part 3

%learning-indonesian-part-3

Tuesday, August 6, 2024

I've been learning Indonesian for about two years now. I'm better at it than ever before. But I'm also questioning whether I should continue.

What use is it to learn a language for yourself, now that AI is as good as it is at translating? I think it's still useful if you want to be able to talk to people without pausing to check your phone for the translation. Also it's useful if you want to feel the full emotional impact of writing or speech. What are the connotations of words? What makes something a good joke or a bad joke? Or good poetry or bad poetry? Even prose has humor and poetry in it. Writing styles use sound, which make more sense if you know the language well. So it is still useful if you want to get close to a people group.

Do I want to do something like that? Before, it seemed clear. It could be useful to relate my writing to the Pancasila religions (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) and also to Indonesian culture in general. This would best be done if I knew people there and read enough Indonesian literature to belong (or to have the substitute for belonging that writers have when they know a culture well-enough to write about it). But now that I think about it, I'm probably never going to be the most qualified person to do the task of relating to the Pancasila religions. It makes more sense for someone who is a "native speaker" in those religions and/or in Indonesia to do that. But maybe I would be the only person who would be willing and available.

Is it likely that I would be? Looking at my priorities, I think that if that day comes, it will be far in the future. First, I would try to focus on philosophy. Next, on relating my philosophy to the Western world (primarily to America, where I live). After that, hopefully someone more qualified than me would know about my writing, to get into the non-Western world. If not, then it might make sense for me to learn Indonesian. But I may never need to for my writing project.

What about for other reasons? I don't see myself doing development-related writing. Maybe move there to save money? I guess it's possible that that would make sense, but it's uncertain that it would. I can already pursue relatively superficial online friendships with people in Indonesia using machine translation. (The deeper ones run into problems with indirect communication, and the usual problems with the fragility of online relationships.) Learning a language is a pastime and mental

workout. But I can find others.

If I need Indonesian, I can pick it up again. My two years of learning it should give me some foundation. I took Spanish classes in high school and college, and have put basically no effort into maintaining my Spanish since, but I find that what I did know I can bring back when I need to, given a bit of time to get back into it.

So my thought for now is to forget about learning Indonesian for now, unless and until I really need it.

Labels: #education, #Indonesia, #life choices, #life lessons

News: 26 October 2024

%news-26-october-2024

Saturday, October 26, 2024

I've been taking a break from philosophy for two years, although I haven't kept to it strictly. It was a promise I made to myself, where I could relax my own demands, but making the promise still made a difference.

It's hard to draw a line between what is and isn't philosophy (maybe all writing that tries to make a point is somewhat philosophical). It's more of a case of knowing it when you see it. While probably some kind of strict, public vow of abstinence to philosophy could be enforced, the costs of defining and enforcing it seem somewhat burdensome to me. But making a vow to myself, while probably sacrificing some rigor, is inexpensive to implement. The vow you actually try to keep is more effective than the stronger one you don't.

In the last two years, I have done the following things:
released a fiction book I had already written, recorded demos of an album, composed and improvised instrumental music, wrote three albums (one released), reviewed my blog, wrote some booklets, set up an Internet radio station, and thought about the relationship between my writing and other people's writing. (Also dealt with personal issues and a crashed computer and backing things up.)

Abstaining from philosophy at first was a welcome break (I think, since I was tired of it when I took it). But after a while, I had recovered from it somewhat and without the vow would have gone back to it. I did break the vow a few times, I guess when there was something important for me to work on, but substantially have kept it. When a book got too philosophical, I set it aside (this happened more than once). One effect of this turning aside is that I looked for other things to read.

I tried practicing Lent a few years ago. I think that Lent is too short for me. 40 days is approximately a month and a half. Two years is 24 months. 24 divided by 1.5 is 16, so I experienced 16 consecutive Lents with this break. That was long enough to really get into it. I feel sometimes like things don't fully arrive before they go away.

The last few months of the break were difficult, a kind of desert experience. I found myself making myself put off decisions until I saw how things would be when I got back into philosophy. Work can be a kind of self-punishment, or it can be like bread, and I find it's mostly the latter for me.

Now my break is over and I've been thinking about what to do next. In July, I started a new blog, called *Following*. It's a blog about "things following" (philosophy) and "people following things" (religion).

Since the fall of 2023, I've been trying to only post posts to this blog that are really necessary, trying to minimize change. From 2019 to 2023 I was writing in a "bleeding edge, maximalist" way, like a testing branch of a Linux distribution (or, somewhat, like regular Ubuntu). But since, I was trying a "conservative, minimalist" approach, like point releases to a distribution one would use for a server (like Debian). I've decided as of now to become even more conservative, to get close to the point where the blog is done, perhaps ready to be made into an ebook version.

So to a large extent, this blog is done. It is more or less fixed in content, more of an object than a process. The period of my life it is about is over, so the thing that it was documenting is now complete, and it can be looked at as a completed thing. The basic project that I've been working on is not over. Something new may supersede the content of much of this blog someday, but for now it's the best representation of my intellectual project.

Labels: #news and meta

PAGES

About This Blog / Me

%about-me

[The following belongs to the past, from the time I was writing this blog. A recent overview of my overall writing project can be found here.]

About this blog

The name of this blog is "formulalessness", which is a way to describe personal beings, as formulalessnesses. The blog is about altruism and belief in God and how the two interrelate. The biggest concern of it is how we are headed toward a civilization that perfects humanism and human well-being as we conceive of it, but which does not take into account the interests of God or of true human well-being, leading to negative consequences for people (and God). We risk something by not taking into account the existence of God. The blog tries to say which God it is that we risk ignoring, the one we should take into account in our risk assessments.

There is also some discussion of how the spiritual life can motivate and help people in dealing with altruistic concerns shared by theists/Christians and secular people.

The blog also talks about the spiritual life -- could be seen as a partial guide to living as though God (and/or the specific God discussed on the blog) exists.

My writing styles vary, so that maybe I seem like two different people, or living in two different worlds, one more spiritual, and the other more prosaic. I think this largely has to do with addressing different cultures or topics. I wish there was a way to integrate all aspects of reality into one thing, and there probably is, but I find it notable that (from my point of view) my writing doesn't totally cohere in an obvious way, as though I can't integrate all of my reality under one voice.

Relatedly, "formulalessness" has a beautiful side, but also a kind of less-functional side, which is that I don't think the posts on this blog are always logically consistent. I have a mental model of what I've said, but I doubt I remember all the details. So I keep adding new things, which may contradict old things. Another less-functional side to "formulalessness" is that while I try to make my posts clear, I can only make them clear to me, and when I look back at past posts, it sometimes takes me a bit to understand what I'm saying, and I can't imagine it being too much easier for people who are not me. (So if you find anything unclear, confusing, or inconsistent in this blog, please let me know so that I can attempt to fix it sometime.)

About me

A lot of author bios say where a person is from. (I'm from San Diego.) Then they talk about universities attended. (I went to UC Davis.) Then they talk about things published and awards won... I don't have as much to say there. Then they talk about where you now live (I think that's an old convention, held over). Well, as of September 2023, I live in San Diego.

I do think that those details can say something if you know what they mean. There is something San Diegan about my writing, maybe a lot. If you know people who went to UC Davis, maybe you can see a connection. But I don't know how to put these connections into words.

Here are a couple of identities that I think I should explain:

I am a Christian.

I am celibate.

You can contact me at my email: **banks at 10v24 dot net**. Also you can follow me at various social media services.

I've done other writing (and other creative projects), which can be found at 10v24.net.

Readers of this blog might especially be interested in the booklets. My full-length books can be found here.

Being Celibate

%being-celibate

In 2012, I first got interested in pursuing celibacy as a life path (remaining single on purpose). Some reasons I've had over the years: I wanted to focus on thinking, and getting married could lead to having a family, which would lead to a mentally demanding job, which would use up my capacity to think. (Another version of that: I have a lot of work to do and having a girlfriend or wife takes energy and intentionality.) Jesus recommends celibacy in Matthew 19, and I thought "I can do that". The beauty of the simplicity of singleness. A consistent ambivalence toward romance going back to when I was in elementary school. I am not interested in having children (instead, creative works and students). The desire to go into "the desert" and to cultivate disestablishedness. Retaining the identity of a "soldier". Keeping God first.

There have been difficulties over the years. Celibacy as an intentional life path is not something that other people understand, largely because it is unexpected. When I have sought female friendship, sometimes it has been interpreted as romantic interest. I ended up in the role of "person who breaks other people's romantic dreams".

Celibacy has freed me to be friends with a variety of women I might not have had time for if I were married. (Has given me more free time in general.) It has also kept me focused on work, and free to follow my work wherever it took me.

Being a Christian

%being-christian

[Heavy edit July 2020]

Someone asked me if I was a Christian and I wanted to answer "yes", but I thought, "people don't always mean the same thing by 'Christian'", so I thought I would clarify what I mean.

I believe in Jesus intellectually, for reasons given on this blog or on my website. My interpretation of the Bible is basically in line with what I've written in *Destruction and Beauty*. There is a way things should be, and in our hearts (our intentions), we must completely comply with that "should", but we get an adequate, though finite, amount of time in which to establish those intentions. What is actually effective in that process varies a lot, notably always includes trust in and regard for, listening to, God, who alone really knows the way things should be.

While I still read the Bible devotionally, I am not much up on my systematic reading or understanding. So I doubt that I could be a completely biblical person, by that standard. However, I do try to obey the implicit law of the New Testament, or at least aspire to. I don't read the Bible every day, but I find the Bible to speak to my life almost every day.

I trust in God in different ways. It's something I work on just about every day. Sometimes I hear things from God. I think God does intervene in the world and that it's possible to be led by God in specific ways.

I try to maintain a basic trust toward God, such that if Jesus returned, I would be interested in knowing that and following him.

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[Update, April 2022]

Since I last wrote here, I did some systematic reading of the Bible. (What I consider systematic.) Less devotional reading. I want to go back to having the Bible as more of my reading diet, but my mind can only focus on one thing, or a few things, at a time, and I have to study other things for now. I find myself more attracted to the Old Testament and Gospels, rather than the rest of the New Testament. At some point I have to explore more the question of the relationship between the OT and NT. But that may not be possible for a while.

I think otherwise things are the same.

I haven't attended church regularly since 2016. I have somewhat of an

allergy to church services and to some extent to church culture. Someday I would like to be part of a group of "unchurched" Christians (not part of a traditional / corporate church), because I would guess they are most like the kind I would get along with. (Judging from church culture in America.)

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[Update, September 2023]

Some relevant information at MSL's Relationship to Christianity.

Bible Source

%bible-source

Bible quotations are from the World English Bible unless otherwise noted. I use the WEB because it is public domain, fairly literal, and in modern language.

Categories of my Writing

%categories-of-my-writing

First written May 2022.

Here is a topical way to talk about my writing.

This page is likely to be added to or perhaps changed over time.

Types of Altruism

One way to categorize my writing is by "type of altruism". I think I'm basically only interested in altruism and religion (and everything else follows from that), and while those two terms are not identical or talk about identical things, they have a lot of overlap. I think it may be the case that my aspired-to religion is necessarily all altruism, and my aspired-to altruism is necessarily all religious, so that for me altruism and religion are two aspects of the same thing, or they will be someday.

(I would define "altruism" to be the orientation toward what is not you, or more strongly (what I mean here), care for the well-being of what or who is not you, or for the well-being of the whole of all beings or all value (which maybe should be called "ethical omnism"). And "religion" as personal orientation toward God, a personal ultimate being.)

"How can we love?"

In 2014, I wrote a book called *How Can We Love?* (and added a second part in 2016). The question of "how can we love?" is meant to work two ways: "how can we love people given that they have done wrong and do wrong?" and "how can we implement altruism / love?". It was my attempt at the time to integrate the Drowning Child Illustration and the New Wine System into my thinking, and apply them to one or more controversies. I would consider it not to be a full digestion of those two ideas. Notably, I think that I didn't really understand the New Wine System at the time. It is also not radically theistic. So the effect is to adopt the New Wine System as a tool for a non-New Wine project. (I didn't realize I was doing this at the time.) That project would be something like "be humanistic, in an altruistic rather than grievance-justice based way". Go out in the world and work on something. I wrote a practical response to this and I think it's telling that basically it says "Go do things that ordinary Christians and non-Christians do", as though you could just join their organizations and pass as one of them, and as though never saying anything that would challenge their worldview to the point of them adopting the New Wine System. It does mention holiness, though, a more New Wine concern, as does *How Can We*

Love?. But I feel like for me, the emphasis of my life and writing in the *How Can We Love?* era (the main part from 2014 to 2018, but still present in some later writing) was on humanistic altruism, not on holiness or (as I would put it now) preventing the second death.

(After re-reading *New Wine for the End Times*, the source of "New Wine System", I realize that there was more to it than I had remembered and adopted, so now for the overlap between it and my own thinking, I use the term "millennial holiness".)

Writing that goes in this category

How Can We Love? and I think everything else from 2014 - 2018. Things to Do, Trustworthiness is Potential Simplicity.

Exilic-Familial

How Can We Love? is about confronting people so that they start to do something, and then go make the world a better place. I wouldn't go so far as to use Eliezer Yudkowsky's language of "winning" with *How Can We Love?*. But I think there is something akin to "winning" in the *How Can We Love?* energy. "Winning" is easy to like if everyone can win together, and maybe the economic emphasis of the EA world works with a Yudkowskian desire to win. But in the political world, winning is a mixed thing. A lot of times, winning makes people lose. Maybe winning isn't such a good thing.

International competition (competition between nation-states) is why we have to have capitalism and war. Capitalism and war are part of why we have to have out-of-control technological progress. Most X-risks are anthropogenic and are downstream of out-of-control technological progress. So it looks like if we could solve international competition, that could help us to have more humane societies (taming or possibly replacing capitalism) and maybe (if it's not too late) slow down our adoption of dangerous technologies. Maybe the analogy of "when is the best time to plant a tree" applies here. The best time for planting trees and to start taming international competition is thirty years ago, but the second-best time is today.

In the political world, people have histories and identities. I think for a person to be a full person, they often or maybe possibly always need to have a history and an identity. Fortunately, we have some choice as to which histories and identities we adopt. So the "exilic" identity is that of people in exile, using the exilic Jews as a template and inspiration. My possibly idiosyncratic reading of them is that they were people who had the ability of winning taken from them, who could not continue to try to win, and who thus were freed to look on their past honestly, seeing the mixedness, brokenness, and evil of it, not excluding that aspect of the truth from their identity, as they might in an attempt to keep winning. I think

this might be something that could defuse some escalated and trauma-infected political situations, allowing for elite cultures (or populaces) of nations to trust each other.

Another thing that I find inspiring about the Jews is that they were / are a family based in holiness. When I was younger, I was drawn more toward the desert, kind of like the inhuman moral truth. I do think that moral truth has some value -- we gaze at it and then go change our lives -- and that the truth has value in itself. I don't know if I will ever be able to reconcile or say which is better, the truth, or well-being. I suppose both are needed. I think for the moral truth to be brought into the world, there need to be people who are working toward that. And that people groups that pursue holiness need to be familial so that within them people get married, have children, are friends, and so on. So how can holiness be implemented in a "familial" way as well as in the desert way?

(In the desert, there is just the individual, God, and the truth, and the individual has no ties to society, or support from it. I think this is a good stance to take and perhaps in private we should all be desert people, but realistically we (generally speaking) are going to have families and friends. And, even in the desert, the relationship between the desert human and God is (or should or could be) a familial one, and we come to understand family, often, from seeing it in people around us.)

Part of being a family is having a family identity, shared history, stories, and so on, so, it's not too much of a stretch to include discussions of different cultures and culture as a topic in this category.

These kinds of thoughts motivate another set of writings, which are basically this-worldly oriented and don't have to be radically theistic or millennial holiness.

Writing that goes in this category

Establishedness and Loving God, part of *Patience*. *The Future of Beauty* connects to some exilic-familial themes.

Radically Theistic and Millennial Holiness

"Radical theism", in this case, means both an epistemic and ethical theism. In other words, to see the world as though God really exists (epistemic) and to be oriented toward God's well-being and interests (ethical -- compare to "humanism" as an ethical stance). It is very easy to be focused on the visible world of humans (and their invisible but blatant needs, desires, opinions, etc.) and to fail to care about God, as though he doesn't exist or as though his feelings and experiences don't matter. Sometimes people say "well, you go so far down a path, but you haven't *really* gone all the way", like Calvinists being maximally Reformed, or Nietzsche being the real atheist among supposed atheists. I fear that I am in their tradition if I

want to say Christianity is not fully itself if it is not radically theistic. I hope that radical theism is the thing which we should really make the root of our thinking, feeling, behaving, trusting, etc. I don't think that Reformedness or atheism are the thing we should go all the way down the path toward, and the fact that people can go all the way down the path of paths that are not worth going that far down is a sobering thing. But, I personally think that radical theism is what I ought to pursue more of, and the "How can we love?" and "exilic-familial" areas of thinking and writing are a kind of thicket or forest to get out of, in order to make sure I can see and walk toward what is most valuable, although they are useful and to some extent connected to that valuable reality.

For me, theism is a millennial holiness thing. To properly understand God and what is good requires us to think in a millennial holiness way. I don't have as firm an idea of what that means as I do of the "How can we love?" and "exilic-familial" paths. I am more in the process still of discovering what it basically is.

I would say that the most urgent thing is the risk of people dying the second death, by hardening, failing to come fully in tune with God. This basic idea is one which I have not fully integrated into me.

So far I have more to say from a "longtermist" perspective, and at a cultural scale, rather than on the scale of "where does the risk of second death show up in people around you and what can you do about it".

Writing that goes in this category

The whole MSLN project, Establishedness and Loving God, *X-Risk* review, Cultural Moloch, Omnisubjective Sexuality, *The Future of Beauty*.

Aletheism

"Humanism" is altruism oriented around humans, "theism" is altruism oriented around God, while "aletheism" is altruism oriented around truth. The truth is pursued for its own sake -- to know what is, and to say what is known of what is.

Writing that goes in this category

Being generous, I would include the whole MSLN project because it tries to honor truth, by trying hard to prove something.

Cultural Moloch: Practically Speaking

%cultural-moloch-practically-speaking

13 October 2020: I split this off of Cultural Moloch.

Practically Speaking

How much does talk of Moloch affect one's daily life? We can enter cognitive worlds that have little effect on what we do. Alexander's Moloch-talk (I think) encourages his listeners (all those inspired by Elua) to apply more effort against Moloch. That's the main practical outcome I'm left with. "Cultural Moloch" leaves us with, "What Alexander said, plus Elua himself can be co-opted by Moloch, so fight that by remembering old values and don't let human existence be subordinated to human well-being, as it is conceivable some state or AI might convince us to so subordinate."

So what can you and I do? We live lives that are tuned toward this generation and maybe the next. Cultural drift is inevitable without thinking beyond what most of our lives concern themselves with. Most people think that what's important is the suffering people *right now*. There's no value in thinking of the future, because we have a moral imperative to *right now*. *Right now* is where all the facts are, and we like to know things. It would make sense that real orientation toward the long term was often in the past based in traditions no one understood.

I, personally, regardless of this article, "Cultural Moloch", would like to see people being as deep, true, real as they can be, and to adjust their sense of what depth, trueness, and reality they are capable of upward. In a way, this is an answer to the pursuit of rationality. I think that people that are maximally real are the kind of people who would make good leaders (not forgetting other virtues such as rationality), to take on the burden of disciplining competitive systems, "God-over-Gnon", which must be filled by specific personal beings. A spreading of depth and reality and the seeking for depth and reality in more and more people makes it easier and easier to grow up to be such a leader -- a community produces a leader. So that's an area of goals that a reader could take up.

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Readers might not see too much threat in cultural Moloch. The most frightening thing is the potential for cultural Moloch to sacrifice human

existence itself as one of its child-values. We're not likely to do that as long as we have evolved brains that balk at stepping too near cliff-edges and so on. But given the potential of genetic engineering, maybe we could change those evolved brains.

There's a connection between fighting for, or building up, courage, and an orientation toward meaning outside of this life, on the one hand, and continued human existence, on the other. Have you ever run a race? When I was on the track team in high school, the coaches had me run through the finish line, not try to just reach it. That way I would run my fastest instead of slowing down as the end approached. We could instead say "Running 800 meters at full effort was hard and brutal back in the day, but we've made the 800 meter race a bit easier by only requiring runners to run 790 meters. We get faster times for the same race. But we're noticing that the advances in people's personal records are going down as people get used to the new distance, so we're thinking of lowering it even further to 780 meters." Eventually it would get to where we stop running races altogether, and wonder how it was possible that anyone ever ran a whole 800 meters at once.

A system can wind itself down or kill itself off, but can it grow without a connection to something outside itself? If a system has any capability of damaging itself or slowing itself down, then it can get stuck at a lower level of functioning. But something outside itself can bring it back up. So the social totality would do well, for its own sake, to look outside of its own interests.

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It's possible that this whole essay suffers from Westernness bias. In other words, the industrialized societies that are emerging in non- Western regions will not end up like Western industrialized culture.

(Similar to the implicit assumption by minorities and women that they will be less bad than white men once they're equally represented in power. Similar also to the implicit assumption by leftists that such self-interest-based institutions as capitalism can be removed, as though human nature is not the same in the 21st century as it was in the 16th. I think all of these assumptions may be correct, but may not be.)

International economic development relies on "leapfrogging", the ability of developing nations to skip ahead to the present technologies instead of slogging all the way through all the intermediate steps, as the West had to. The West paves the way. Maybe there could be "cultural leapfrogging", where non-Western cultural leaders take care to try to preserve their non-Westernness (their Indianness or South Asianness, Ethiopianness or Africanness, etc.) as they industrialize, look ahead to our cultural Moloch lest they fall prey to it. I'm sure this is already on some people's minds.

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Cultural Moloch proceeds two ways. One way is to increase the fitness of those who bear the culture. This is the way things seem to have worked for most of human history. Another way is for the ideas themselves to appeal to people independent of how they affect fitness.

Reason works by "seeing things from your own best point of view" or "seeing things from humanity's own best point of view" and getting what you personally, or humanity as a whole, sees as good. The first, seeing things, is epistemic rationality, the second, getting things, is instrumental rationality.

Tradition works by suppressing reason so that what is superior to reason, evolved culture, can rule over us. Since "God died" or after similar cultural movements, we can no longer rely on tradition. Whatever blind spots are in our reason must damn us.

Sometimes you realize that what the appetitive side of you "sees" as good is not the same as what you really see as good. Tradition could clamp down on your appetites, perhaps even by causing you to deny facts that connect to your temptation. Sometimes a culture realizes that something isn't good but can't coordinate resistance to its own mass temptation.

Arts and entertainment tend to proceed appetitively. If you don't feel like making it, don't make it. If you don't feel like watching it, don't watch it. But it might be possible for people to make art deliberately but not appetitively, and to consume it deliberately and not appetitively. This seems to already be in practice to some extent in the avant-garde art scene.

One thing I try to do is consume art by non-famous people, to erode the power of fame. I'd like to see fame as a value ratcheted down a bit, in order to ratchet up the value of listening to people just because they're people. But it doesn't always feel natural to do this. I'm not much of a fiction reader these days. So when I want to read someone's novel, I have to soldier through it like it's a textbook. Reading a famous novel, I might have an easier time, but it's still like getting through a pile of material. But soldiering through things is good, it fights the slide into suicide- by-cultural-Moloch.

Avant-garde people report that they gain the ability to have appetites for strange sounds, images, objects, flavors, etc. I've experienced something like this. If you practice seeing something some way deliberately, sometimes you can start to see it that way appetitively, having opened your eyes to what was there all along. Well-directed avant-garde art and art appreciation could resurrect old "children" on the appetitive and not just deliberate level.

Culture also proceeds by social interactions, whether casual or as part of ongoing relationships. In theory, one could cultivate less appetitive relationships deliberately, and maybe they would become appetitive, or not. Sometimes this would turn out to be a bad idea, but other times it would allow for positive cultural change, and it would be "anti-morphine".

Traditional cultures rely on that which can never be understood, and so subordinate individual human nature and appetites. So they are a discipline against the worst of individualism. Modern cultures rely on what human beings can understand, and they in turn can liberate us from traditions that no longer fit our environments, and in this liberation enslave us to human nature and human appetites. Postmodern cultures, then, could knowingly oppose human nature and human appetites in order to deliberately have what is better than what we feel like. So we could say that traditional cultures proceed by tradition, modern cultures by nature, and truly postmodern cultures by art.

Postmodernity (whether in its art-world or academic versions or its on-the-ground hipster version) has gotten a bad rap, whether because it's destructive in its aims or overly-refined or not excellent-spirited or whatever other objection. But, if those charges are true, postmodernity can shift toward championing something really deep and courageous.

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"Art" perhaps is too artificial a word. Good art is made by genuine people. Art can be fake, mannered, manufactured. You can never really overcome fakeness on your own -- to try is fake itself. All you can do is "wait for God" -- often enough, literally wait for God.

So God, the teacher and source of ultimate depth of personality, with his long-term, general, short-term, and specific desires, is a fourth term alongside tradition, nature, and art. But God is outside human institutions, so I will not make a case for him being an element in some deliberate social order. However, waiting for his revelation (allowing, taking the point of view of the atheists, that it may never come) is conducive to the goals of postmodernism.

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"Art" sounds like something that should go along with what we class as the fine arts or popular culture. But "art" in a more general sense could characterize any deliberate, knowing human behavior. It characterizes the virtue-form of the artist. (Art is the behavior of people who are always artists.) The artist could be someone who is inspired and disciplined by God and deliberately speaks (or performs the equivalent of speaking) to act on the side of God. (And to take the point of view of secular people, what is deepest in personal nature.) Artists see things as God sees them and then act and create out of their own desires which align themselves to

God's.

So there could be "artists" who are academics or politicians or pastors or entrepreneurs or perhaps even managers or military officers.

Even parenting, or the kind of casual disciplining that occurs between friends, could be considered art. Here most clearly we see the dangers that come of doing so without being trustworthy in how we approach things. Taking on some kind of "I am an artist" point of view, or "they need me to 'work art' in their lives", is dangerous. We have to have respect. The book of James in the Bible warns us that "teachers will be judged more harshly". The dangers of being an artist (and yet the necessity of some people being artists) apply in all areas of human leadership, in the arts, the academy, politics, religion, business, military, and those not mentioned above.

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What is deep, real human personality? A good starting place is whatever people tend to say it is already without thinking too hard. One more definite idea is, "trusting as much as is appropriate; trusting with the deepest parts of you". So whenever you can, advance the frontier of trust. Another is "loyalty that costs you". I can hear a rationalist on one shoulder saying "define everything before we begin" and a postmodernist on another saying "don't define anything". The midpoint is to offer ideas. But also to say that deep, real human personality is never a formula. Since it is not a formula, it can't be the formula of anti-formula, and so does conform at least to some patterns, without being fully graspable. Formulaic thinking goes along with lack of trust.

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A discussion of depth of personality should address love.

Modern love tends to be "emotional attachment" plus "maximizing others' well-being". It's that simple, that definite.

A more traditional or postmodern approach might not define love, but rather describe it. The New Testament, which deifies love (or looks like it does, in a sense) also never defines it, but only describes it and shows it in action. So we do not fully grasp love, and if we're wise, we don't hold onto it as a complete formula for agenda-forming.

Is love patient, kind, not envious, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking; doesn't keep record of wrongs, and so on as in 1 Corinthians 13? That sounds like a start.

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Speaking of love reminds me that after all I've said about art, the real goal of postmodernism is new human nature. Being loved artistically,

overriding human nature, can eventually lead to collapses and betrayals. The words of 1 Corinthians 13 are supposed to have their counterpart in the Spirit that enables Christians to live them out. Every child starts out as unformed as any and then has to learn and be taught how to become a member of their culture. It's difficult to live to a certain age and not be a member of your culture, whatever your culture may happen to be. Looking at the different traditional and modern cultures shows that the cultural component of human nature has a considerable range. If this part of human nature can be brought into a state which is excellent and sustainable, then we will have moved past the age of art and once again into an age of nature, an actually trustworthy neomodernism.

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So a life aspiration can be to be a postmodernist, seeking a new modernism perhaps many generations in the future, one which will educate its young (our descendants) into real personality.

Fiducial Utilitarianism (old)

%fiducial-utilitarianism-old

I may rewrite this, maybe try to make something for the EA Forum. Also, for a mildly "continental philosophy"-leaning treatment of fiducialism, see this booklet on the subject.

15 Sep 2020: Receptivity to Reality is an important addition to this.

11 Sep 2020: edited for clarity.

What is fiducialism?

Here is a replacement for a common idea that affects how people approach caring. The idea is that by changing the idea, there might be some change in how people actually approach reality. I think culture is embodied in people rather than in words. But the idea matters somewhat, even as only a signal or as an image to appreciate like you might appreciate a beautiful landscape. Also, with effort, maybe this idea can be put into practice or embedded in technological design or policy.

Two popular versions of utilitarianism are: the one based in maximizing pleasure and/or minimizing pain (hedonic), and the one based in people getting what they really want (preference). Opinions may differ on which one is best. If I had to choose between the two for myself, I think I might choose preference over hedonism. But I can see the value in pursuing both. Some sort of balance between the two seems to be preferable to only having one or the other.

What I would suggest is to consider replacing hedonism with something else -- maximizing trust / minimizing betrayal. This could be called "fiducial utilitarianism". Or, in contrast to "hedonism", "fiducialism". My definition of "trust" is "receptivity to enhancement", which is taken from Joseph Godfrey's *Trust of People, Words, and God*. ("Fiducial" is his word for "pertaining to trust".) My definition of "betrayal" is "that which is an insult to the 'organ of trust'", "insult" in the medical sense. You can imagine that many things that cause pain are a form of betrayal. If you get sick enough, you don't feel like socializing. When you're depressed, the world seems small and lacking depth. After a break-up, it can take a while to get to where you want to date new people. Some bad experiences can (seemingly) permanently keep you from seeking out new experiences in a certain vein.

When in a bad situation, do you trust it, or not? You can try to trust it as much as it ought to be trusted. So you might resist the damage that the

situation "wants" to do to you. But when you think about it late at night, rather than seeing it as unfair chance, or some kind of cosmic punishment, you can see it as a discipline, or you can practice acceptance. The discipline view is receptive to enhancement from the bad situation. In a sense it calls it "good". Similarly with the acceptance view. If you understand the situation, you know that it is also bad and unacceptable. But you can be disposed to find exactly whatever good there is in it.

When you are in a good situation, do you appreciate it? A fiducialist ought to not fall prey to the hedonic treadmill. A fiducialist seeks to trust a good situation even more than what seems called for by how it immediately presents. Maslow's Hierarchy seems like something that inevitably leads to the pinnacle ("self-actualization", or whatever might be higher), but it doesn't have to. People can settle. But a fiducialist doesn't settle. Their receptivity tends to cause them to find reality insufficient -- not necessarily bad, often good, but they are receptive to something more.

This disposition leads a fiducialist to reach out beyond the present moment, to imagine a better world or a better reality. A fiducialist doesn't just see the present. They want to connect to the deepest, truest reality. A fiducialist is disposed to work, explore, observe, and endure.

Fiducialists ought to be people who care. People who care are the very people who go into pursuits like altruism. It is also possible that a fiducialistic orientation can be protective against value drift, in the cases that receptivity to certain values fade over time, causing drift.

Comparison with hedonism

To a large extent, hedonic utilitarianism is satisfied by fiducial utilitarianism, although the reverse is less true. The disjunction could be, on the one hand, hedonism's concern for small pains on the one hand, and fiducialism's concern for settling at a comfortable local maximum of suffering, and fiducialism's desire to trust even suffering. I think any example of suffering that a hedonist could give, saying "how could you not get rid of this suffering if you had the choice?" would tend to be something that a fiducialist would object to as well. Suffering does tend to deepen people -- some people. But it embitters others. So a good goal for a fiducialist is to maximize trust without there being suffering. The deepest trust tends to be developed in times of breakdown, and suffering. But that is only a tendency, and in principle, we could learn to trust just as deeply without any of that. It could be argued that some people choose to suffer so that they can be broken down, and then trust (maybe EAs don't think this way...).

Hedonism has some edge cases that fiducialism might disregard. For instance, in thought experiments involving billions of people getting paper

cuts, a fiducialist would say "let those people learn to deal with paper cuts -- they can live with that -- life is rich enough for there to be paper cuts". But the things that are harder for people to live with would be relevant material for fiducialism to target for changing.

I think a lot of people lean fiducialist already, and would be more motivated to deal with the problems that hedonism targets through the means of an intensified, self-conscious fiducialism than they would be by the language of hedonic utilitarianism.

Comparison with preference and hedonistic utilitarianism

Fiducialism would seem to produce people who had high life satisfaction, and one could "integrate" one's life over many moments of satisfaction to produce an overall satisfaction with life. In other words, those prone to trusting the moments of their life end up trusting their lives as a whole. Aspects of fiducialism resemble preference utilitarianism. You could look at it like, you adjust your preferences to fit your situation, and that is trust.

Preference-orientation says "I get what I want". A preference- orientation that says "what I want is to accept the moment" is not the same as trusting the moment out of trust-orientation. Trust-orientation says "I am receptive, open to, connecting with reality outside myself except insofar as it limits my ability to connect with reality outside myself." So the question, for a hedonist, is "how do we reduce suffering / increase pleasure?", for a preference utilitarian, "how do we give people what they want?", and for a fiducialist, "how do we facilitate, encourage, teach, lead, become trustworthy toward people such that, they connect with reality?" Out of this connection with reality comes caring.

(Incidentally, this emphasis on connecting with reality could unify the opposition between instrumental and epistemic rationality. Instrumental rationality in fiducialism is defined as "connecting with, or helping someone connect with, reality" and epistemic rationality is a subset of connecting with reality.)

Psychological and political considerations

One reason why people are more trust-oriented than otherwise is that they have burned out on other forms of processing reality. From my own experience, trust is easier on the brain and body than morality. If you care out of trust of the good of good work rather than out of a horror of suffering (or hatred of those, yourself and/or others, who do less good or

more bad than they should) then you can stay in the game longer (or, I can). It's an open question who works harder or can put in more work in in the long run. A fiducialist has to remember some of the lessons of the horror-oriented altruist -- trust horror-orientation for what it's worth.

Relevant to polarization, political opponents tend to be hatred- or horror-oriented, rather than trust-oriented. Ostensibly, everyone is on the same basic side: "Doing what's right for America" -- a kind of altruism. Hatred and horror see things in a bad light -- so some altruists hide from politics. But if politics were trust-based, it would not be much like that.

I don't know the exact connection between hatred, horror, and hedonism. Probably there is some non-fiducialist approach to things that is neither hatred- nor horror-based but which is still intellectually hedonist. I think there is a kind of correlation between hatred, horror, and hedonism, at least in ways that correlate with moving away from trust, which fiducialism avoids.

The word "love" is attractive at large, and could be seen as a substitute ideal to trust, but I think "trust" is better. Trust precedes love. Also, trust is more basic and simple than love. From Godfrey's basic definition, I think the simplest conscious beings trust, when they may not love. We always trust -- even our doubts and suspicions.

Conclusion

Since fiducialism can adopt the goals of hedonism to such a great extent, since it may protect against burnout and value drift, since it is consonant with cultural changes that favor altruism, and since it ought to promote the supply of people who might become altruists or altruism-adjacent people in the future, I think it is a good replacement for hedonism in moral calculations and policies.

Introduction to my Writing, for Effective Altruists

%introduction-to-my-writing-for

I first heard about EA in 2013. I was at a talk given at a university where I used to hang out. What really struck me about the talk was the Drowning Child Illustration. I didn't join the movement, but that idea got into me. In 2017 I started attending an SSC meetup group and there were a few people there into EA. I didn't think much about EA, except the Drowning Child Illustration. In 2020 I started looking at the EA Forum, and thought a lot about EA and its current concerns. I decreased my interest in 2021, but still followed the Forum some in 2022.

I think in some ways I am the kind of person who would be in EA, but I don't feel like I fit in the mainstream EA movement.

I would describe my blog as usually being "notes" and not "finished product". This is not a complete list of every post an EA might find interesting.

The posts -- in roughly descending order of how close they are to mainstream EA concerns:

Long Reflection Reading List -- thoughts about the difficulty of the Long Reflection, what it would take to pursue it, and some related topics like moral progress.

Cultural Altruism (Hubs) -- "cultural altruism" as an alternative or adjunct to effective altruism and the Long Reflection, and discussion of where to site a cultural altruism hub.

Reading list on population ethics -- presents the "rest" view of population ethics, in contrast to the "total" view.

Agency and AI -- a perhaps too short post about a value to program AI to promote.

What if ASI Believed in God? -- If a logical case for the existence of God can be made, or even for the "non-Pascalian" likelihood that God exists, could this affect AI behavior? If such a case wouldn't affect AI behavior, what would that mean about AI?

Economic vs. Personal Lens on Morality -- often I feel like EA's conception of morality is as "maximize a variable" or "pile up a specific kind of wealth". But an alternative is "relate to other beings properly". This post

discusses the two.

The Drift of Financial and Electoral Systems and AI -- if ASI are under human control, they might be under existing financial or electoral incentive structures (or the descendants of those structures), which could end up turning people into buying- or voting-machines.

Survival Moloch vs. Hedonic Moloch -- "Moloch" can be stretched to be about any optimization which gets us to throw away "delicate" values. Over time, hedonism as psychological force can get us to throw away delicate values, like the drive to survive. Holiness and strength suggested as alternate optimization goals.

Philosphical AI; AI and Trust -- "Will AGI be able to do philosophy? Would that be a natural side effect of its ability to reason?" Plus some discussion of AI and trust.

Turn Toward Politics -- Maybe a lot of EAs or EA-adjacent people should get into politics and what is adjacent to politics (religion, art, culture), because if we can figure out AI alignment, that might be the remaining bottleneck to good being done.

ASI Centralizing Technological Development? -- Maybe ASI will be so good at research that it will have a monopoly on research, or something in that direction.

Space Colonization? Or End to Moloch? -- Maybe there is a conflict between ending Moloch and space colonization.

Ending Moloch -- Maybe we can end Moloch by bringing about international cooperation. Not by creating a one world government, but by making all nations friendly with each other.

X-Risk review -- a review of *X-Risk* by Thomas Moynihan. His book argues for the need to oppose X-risk for certain reasons (it's also a history of X-risk as a concept, but that proved less interesting to me). My review claims that for a really effective anti-X risk ideology, there needs to be a stronger moral realism than what Moynihan suggests; also opposes Moynihan's worldview and generally any worldview that puts pleasure above being a real person.

Feeling of Value review -- a review of *The Feeling of Value* by Sharon Hewitt Rawlette. Her book argues for a moral realism founded in normative qualia. My review claims that her moral realism does work to some extent but is incomplete. (The review is lengthy, and I don't remember all of what I said. I think there may be more than that.)

Cultural Moloch -- a post about how cultural drift could lead us to sacrificing old values (without even thinking of it as sacrifice).

"There's Nothing Special About Where You Came From" -- a heuristic that leads to a more objective, cosmopolitan worldview, or maybe to nihilism as a logical conclusion. Maybe consciousness is just a thing we are emotionally attached to because of where we came from.

MSLN -- a set of arguments, proceeding from weaker, more defensible / more mainstream claims to stronger, less defensible / less mainstream claims, which argue for the existence of, 1. a vague possibility that a certain kind of God exists, 2. a stronger sense that that God does exist plus more information about him/her/them, 3. a thicker version of the same God, who founds moral realism (this argument also implies a kind of proto- or minimalist Christianity without necessarily getting the Bible involved), and finally 4. an articulation with work someone else has done which finds a compatible God / worldview in the Bible. The thing that is found in all of the arguments is the view that God (or the possible God) is one who needs us to come to be 100% in tune with him so that we can live with him, and we have to do this ourselves on the most important level of aligning our own values with his. This process is necessarily finite in duration, but is too much for us to complete in this life. Therefore, there will be another one in which we can complete it. This could be relevant to many EA concerns, but is this far down the list because it's probably the furthest of what I've mentioned so far from mainstream EA. However, I did at least in the area of population ethics (and perhaps in others I'm not remembering) try to directly relate the logical consequences of "my version of God" with questions that EAs ask about what to do. The MSLN readings are long (if you look up all of them). (This is a work in progress.)

My blog in general -- In the latter part, from 2021 to now, there is more discussion of politics. I think if humans control AI, politics will become the biggest secular concern. I don't want to say I have above-average insights into politics, nor below-average, but I do think I have my own point of view which may be unique in some ways.

Each of the links to my writing so far in this post are found on my blog, dating from 2019 to 2022. I also have written some weirder (/ less mainstream EA-like), more personal, more religious writing, some non-fiction and fiction.

I released a fiction book that talks about issues of rationality, religion, romance, friendship, altruism, cultural decay, and meaning, entitled *Waiting for Margot*. It's in the format of a sitcom, with heavy dialogue and themes.

I have a sequence of books, two of which are non-fiction, the rest fiction, which could be seen as the story of having the Drowning Child Illustration plus some other driving ideas stuck in your head while you try to deal with the isolation that comes from that / the dangers of the people around you who do not accept that.

Links / Blogs / Etc.

%links-blogs-etc

[This page represents the years 2019 - 2023.]

Here are some links that I have found interesting, that perhaps readers of my blog would find interesting.

Sources

(Roughly in descending order of how closely I followed them over the last few years.)

Slate Star Codex / Astral Codex Ten: blog. Philosophy, politics, psychiatry, rationalist community.

Effective Altruism Forum: forum. Philosophical and, especially, practical side of social movement trying to leverage limited resources for high impact.

We Are Not Saved: blog. Nassim Nicholas Taleb fan, SSC fan, pro-tradition, pro-religion, pro-risk management, critic of rationalists and EAs.

Plough: magazine (online and in print). Christian humanist (pro-humanities, pro-human nature), pro-embodiment and -nature, implicit critic of some aspects of rationalist and EA project.

Andy Edwards: YouTube channel. Music history, cultural history, aesthetics. I see him as a fan of amateurism, of emotion in music as opposed to perfectionism. (Mostly watched his general videos, not his top 10s, but some jazz fusion and prog videos.)

New Wine: website, YouTube. Major source for me: holiness, biblical harmony, just afterlife (people have a fair chance at heaven).

Links

Under construction (I think.) But see also my subreddit where I post links.

Top Posts

%top-posts

I would say my blog is best read as a collection of notes, and so there aren't a lot of "top posts". But these are some posts I think stand up well over time and are presentable:

In no particular order:
1. Rootedness and Respect
2. Establishedness and Loving God
3. Omnisubjective Sexuality

I also made a topical introduction of my writing project.

[See also a more recent overview.]

And, an introduction for effective altruists.

If you like reading short posts, you can read those tagged notes and definitions.